

AIRPOWER AND THE 1972 EASTER OFFENSIVE

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Military History

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MATTHEW C. BRAND, LT COL, USAF
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THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

Name of Candidate: Lt Col Matthew C. Brand

Thesis Title: Airpower and the 1972 Easter Offensive

Approved by:

_____, Thesis Committee Chair
LTC (ret) James H. Willbanks, Ph.D.

_____, Member
Lt Col William J. Martin, M.A.

_____, Member
Col David M. Neuenswander, M.A.

Accepted this 16th day of June 2006 by:

_____, Director, Graduate Degree Programs
Robert F. Baumann, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

AIRPOWER AND THE 1972 EASTER OFFENSIVE, by Lt Col Matthew C. Brand, 121 pages.

In the spring of 1972, North Vietnam launched a massive, three-pronged attack into South Vietnam that was eventually repulsed by South Vietnamese forces, United States (US) advisors and massive amounts of American airpower. The problem is determining what factors were key to South Vietnam's successful defense. To that point, this thesis will address the overall effectiveness of US airpower in defeating North Vietnam's attack. This paper first examines the strategic and operational environment surrounding the 1972 offensive, including the role and influence that the leaders of the US, Saigon, Hanoi, China, and the Soviet Union had on the conflict. It then shifts to the three primary tactical battles, describing each in detail, from the initial communist successes to their ultimate defeat. Finally, the analysis focuses specifically on airpower's role, from the massive strategic deployment that doubled the available assets in theater in just over a month, to its operational success striking targets in North Vietnam, to its tactical successes on the various battlefields of South Vietnam. Ultimately, this analysis determines that US airpower, with US advisors playing a critical enabling role, was the decisive element in the defeat of North Vietnam's Easter Offensive.

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ACRONYMS

AAA	Anti-aircraft Artillery
ALO	Air Liaison Officer
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CAS	Close Air Support
DASC	Direct Air Support Center
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAC-A	Forward Air Controller-Airborne
FSB	Fire Support Base
JGS	Joint General Staff
LGB	Laser-guided Bomb
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MR	Military Region
NSC	National Security Council
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
TACC	Tactical Air Control Center
TACP	Tactical Air Control Party
TACS	Tactical Air Control System
TF	Task Force
TTP	Tactics, Techniques and Procedures
US	United States

USAF	United States Air Force
VC	Viet Cong
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force
VNMC	Vietnamese Marine Corps

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On this question of the B-52s and the tac air, it's very clear to me that--as far as my view on this is concerned--that this government would now have fallen, and this country would now be gone, and we wouldn't be meeting here today, if it hadn't been for the B-52s and the tac air.¹

General Creighton W. Abrams

On 30 March 1972, North Vietnam launched a massive offensive into South Vietnam along several fronts. After prepping the battlefield with heavy artillery barrages, 40,000 North Vietnamese troops poured into South Vietnam unexpectedly through the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated the two nations.² An additional 20,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops, many of whom had infiltrated South Vietnam ahead of time, lodged in the rugged, forested highland area north and west of Pleiku.³ Their third and final major thrust was just north and northwest of Saigon, ultimately sending three divisions totaling 35,000 into Binh Long Province on 5 April.⁴

Both sides recognized the great significance of the moment. South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu described the invasion as “the final battle to decide the survival of the [South Vietnamese] people,” and North Vietnam had grand visions of potentially hastening the early defeat of South Vietnam.⁵ The outcome of this great campaign is now known. South Vietnam, the United States (US) and their allies stopped the offensive, took the initiative, and drove the Communists back in most areas. This thesis will determine to what extent US airpower played the key role in this unfolding drama. Were US air forces the most decisive factor to the defeat of North Vietnam's

Easter Offensive, or were they just one of many equally effective elements to the defense of South Vietnam?

The US military had been in Vietnam since the 1950s, initially providing mainly counterinsurgency advice and training. This mission began to shift as American forces began to take a more direct combat role. With this shift, the US had contributed larger amounts of conventional forces starting in 1965, topping out with over half a million by 1969.⁶ However, President Nixon's election in 1968 marked a strategic shift in the US Vietnam policy. Soon after his inauguration in January 1969, Nixon began making good on his promises to bring American troops home from Vietnam and bring an honorable peace to the war-torn Southeast Asian nation. In the summer of that year, Nixon, along with President Nguyen Van Thieu, announced their plan for "Vietnamization" of the war in South Vietnam. They would gradually build up South Vietnam's capability to defend itself without the presence of American forces. This would require Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) Commander General Creighton W. Abrams to provide maximum assistance to South Vietnam's troop build up, support of the pacification program, and a reduction of the flow of supplies to Communist guerrilla forces in South Vietnam. The pacification program was designed to placate the populace throughout South Vietnam, increase support to the Thieu government, and reduce sympathy for the Communist cause in the south.⁷

By the end of 1971, Abrams was carrying out Nixon's strategy. US forces in Vietnam numbered roughly 150,000 by year's end, with just over 100,000 US Army ground troops present, down from the earlier high of over half a million forces in 1969.⁸ In contrast, South Vietnam had over one million men and women under arms, with

414,000 in the active-duty army, and approximately 500,000 in the regional and popular reserve forces.⁹ This numerically robust South Vietnamese military would be severely tested in the coming months of 1972 as it confronted the Easter Offensive, the North's first major country-wide assault since the failed 1968 Tet invasion.

The United States Air Force (USAF) was also reducing its numbers in theater. By the end of March 1972, they had only 20,000 personnel in Vietnam, with another 27,000 stationed in Thailand. The South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was now doing the large majority of in-country air strikes, flying 3,300 of 4,000 Allied air strikes in February of that year.¹⁰ Like the Army, the USAF was trying hard to train the South Vietnamese to completely take over the air war in Vietnam. In a way, the USAF had come full circle since its arrival in Vietnam.

Prior to 1965, the USAF in Vietnam was predominantly advising and training the VNAF in its counterinsurgency efforts. This advisory role gradually shifted to a direct combat role, and by 1965, American aircraft were flying combat missions in both North and South Vietnam.

While continuing to support Allied ground forces with close air support (CAS) between 1965 and 1968, the US also launched Operation Rolling Thunder. This operation was designed to destroy the North Vietnamese will to fight, to destroy industrial bases and air defenses, and stop the flow of men and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Despite dropping more bombs during this single campaign than all of the Allied bombs dropped during World War II, Rolling Thunder generally failed to meet its objectives.

On 11 November 1968, the Americans launched Operation Commando Hunt with the goal of interdicting men and supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, through Laos and

into South Vietnam. The outcome was similar to Rolling Thunder. At its completion, three million tons of bombs had been dropped on Laos, which slowed, but did not seriously disrupt trail operations.

Airpower in Vietnam, as in most wars, operated under a variety of political constraints. Once the US military became fully involved in the war in 1965, USAF leaders sought less restrictive targeting guidance in their strategic air campaign against the North. Both President Johnson and President Nixon dealt with the political pressure placed upon them by weak domestic support. Furthermore, the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union presented a complex strategic environment, as did US relations with China, North Vietnam's powerful Communist ally directly to its north. Providing an additional diplomatic twist, North Vietnam's primary supply route into South Vietnam went through the countries of Laos and Cambodia.

While the US strategic air attack and interdiction campaigns had limited effect on North Vietnam, the USAF developed a highly effective CAS system to assist both US and South Vietnamese ground troops with timely and accurate fire support. The Americans used a system of centralized control and decentralized execution that was very good at planning, directing, and executing air support to ground forces. This system would be severely tested by the North's massive offensive, particularly as the US was shifting responsibility of air support to the South Vietnamese.

The Easter Offensive: The Strategic and Operational View

Why did North Vietnamese leaders choose to invade South Vietnam in the spring of 1972? Was the offensive successful? Did they achieve their objectives? What truly

was the aftermath? Before these questions can be answered, the US and South Vietnam's status on the eve of this massive offensive must be examined.

War-torn South Vietnam was relatively quiet in March 1972. The large conventional defeat of North Vietnamese forces during the 1968 Tet offensive had decimated the Viet Cong (VC), the Communist South Vietnamese indigenous unconventional forces that had plagued South Vietnam's government and army up to that point.¹¹ Pacification, the program to win legitimacy for the South Vietnamese government, particularly in the impoverished countryside, had taken root and seemed to offer both security and economic recovery despite momentary set-backs during Tet.¹² Vietnamization, the effort to train, organize and equip South Vietnam forces to take over their own defense, also appeared successful in the early months of 1972 despite set backs in 1971 when Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces had unsuccessfully attacked into Laos.¹³

Vietnamization went hand-in-hand with American disengagement, which was in high gear during this period. This was all part of a broader strategy to strengthen the Asian allies and help prevent the spread of communism, known as the Nixon Doctrine, whereby the US would assist with material, technical advice, airpower and even naval power if necessary. However, further use of US ground forces in direct action was to be avoided in all but extreme circumstances.¹⁴

The overarching strategic backdrop to the US situation in Vietnam in 1972 was further complicated by the fact that the US was attempting to negotiate a peace treaty with North Vietnam in Paris. Ironically, even though Vietnamization and pacification were both on a successful path, the withdrawal of US troops left the US in a weak

negotiating position relative to North Vietnam in the weeks leading up to the Easter Offensive. With antiwar feeling stronger than ever in America, the Nixon administration felt heavy political pressure to continue, if not accelerate, the American force withdrawal from Vietnam. Hanoi's leaders were well aware of this fact, which left Nixon's National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger little to bargain with at the Paris peace negotiations.

North Vietnam's overarching strategy by 1972 was threefold. First, its leaders were building up their conventional military strength by importing a multitude of new military equipment and other supplies from the Soviet Union and China. This equipment included T-54 tanks, 100 millimeter howitzers, AT-3 Sagger antitank missiles and SA-7 manned-portable surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems. All of these systems would play a major role in the Easter Offensive. The second part of the North's strategy was to try to revive the power of the VC, while concurrently reducing popular support of the South Vietnamese president and his government throughout the vast rural areas of Vietnam. The North rightfully recognized pacification as a serious threat to its strategy and needed to unravel it. The final piece of the North Vietnamese strategy was to prepare for a conventional attack against South Vietnam. This final strategic goal led to the development of the Nguyen Hue campaign, also known as the Easter Offensive, and it had the following four specific objectives:

1. Influence US Presidential Election and hasten the withdrawal of US troops
2. Demonstrate to the Soviets and to China that North Vietnam was still a credible fighting force
3. Reverse the successful advances of the American pacification program

4. Alter the military balance in South Vietnam, show the futility of Vietnamization, and weaken the US position at the Paris peace talks¹⁵

Arguably, North Vietnam failed in all four objectives, and yet, three years later, following the US pullout, the NVA was marching on Saigon, successfully unifying the wartorn nation under communist rule. Before analyzing the aftermath, however, the offensive itself must be briefly explained, although details of the attacks main battles will follow in the next section.

North Vietnam staged three primary attacks: (1) directly south through the DMZ into the Quang Tri Province, (2) through Cambodia and Laos into the Central highlands, and (3) into the Binh Long Province just northwest of Saigon (see figure 1). All were initially successful, driving South Vietnamese forces back in each case. The NVA relied on surprise, massive artillery barrages, armor, and improved tactical surface-to-air defenses to assist in garnering their initial gains. In the northern-most province, the ARVN was driven back to Quang Tri, where they failed to hold the city, yielding the provincial capital to the NVA. The communist invaders almost succeeded in taking the city of Kontum in the Highlands, and An Loc in the province directly north of Saigon nearly fell, but the ARVN held in both places after savage battles that halted the northern advances.

In all three military regions (MRs), the South Vietnamese, along with their American advisors wavered under the North Vietnamese attacks, with Quang Tri in MR I falling to the NVA. Eventually, however, these forces stiffened, consolidated their defenses and stopped the NVA, while airpower pummeled the invading forces with great effect. Finally, faced with relentless air assaults and stubborn defenders on the ground,

NVA forces pulled back to near their original lines of departure, giving back Quang Tri to South Vietnamese forces in the process. While South Vietnamese losses were high, they were nothing compared to the thousands of NVA soldiers who perished during the Easter Offensive.

At a glance, the aftermath of the Easter Offensive seems easy to assess. After all, the Communist attacks were repulsed and it turned out to be a wholesale defeat for North Vietnam. They suffered staggering losses of personnel and equipment. NVA bodies, armor, and other equipment littered all three main battle areas. In fact, the Easter Offensive victory, along with other developments late in 1972, eventually drove North Vietnam to accept Nixon's peace settlement terms. These other developments included Nixon's re-election, tough diplomatic negotiations, and finally the punitive bombings of North Vietnam during Operation Linebacker II. The agreement gave Nixon a political "win" by finally ending the Vietnam War, but unfortunately Hanoi's leaders had no intention of keeping their word. Instead, they used the agreement as a cloak behind which they reconstituted their force and prepared for the final phase of the reunification of Vietnam under Communist rule. So in the end, the analysis of the Easter Offensive's aftermath is not so simple.



Figure 1. North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive

Source: James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 128.

North Vietnam learned valuable lessons from the defeat, not the least of which was that battlefield success is impossible in the face of enemy air superiority. Every time the NVA seemed on the verge of breakthroughs in the Easter Offensive, air strikes drove them back. These lessons were not lost on South Vietnam's leaders either. In fact, with the Americans and their airpower aggressively pulling out of Vietnam, leaders in the south, including President Thieu, developed a fatalistic attitude towards their adversaries. They felt that without the Americans, their defeat was inevitable. As it turned out, they were right.

The Three Key Battles

South Vietnam's Defenses

By the start of the Easter Offensive, the South Vietnamese Army had a corps headquarters in charge of each of the four MRs, commanding several divisions along with their subordinate elements. Each of these corps, divisions, and brigades had US advisors attached to them as part of the Vietnamization effort. These advisors not only gave advice to their Vietnamese counterparts as their name would imply, but they also had the ability to call in fire support over US fire support channels.¹⁶

The Battle for Quang Tri and Hue

There were many signs of a looming North Vietnamese offensive as Easter approached in Vietnam in 1972. The South Vietnamese and Americans were aware that the North was importing and stockpiling plenty of military equipment and supplies from the Soviets and China in several areas close to the South Vietnamese border. However, North Vietnam's initial choice to plunge through the DMZ dividing the two nations came

as a complete surprise to leaders in the south. Even though intelligence indicated Hanoi was readying supplies, men and equipment, and with some analysts predicting such an attack, South Vietnamese leaders refused to believe that they would so blatantly violate the Geneva Accords by crossing the DMZ.¹⁷ Using momentum from their surprise attack, the NVA initially drove back ARVN forces to defensible positions behind the Cam Lo, Mieu Giang, and Cua Viet rivers, and then back to Quang Tri City. However, when Quang Tri City fell, the ARVN forces shifted their focus to the defense of Hue. Constant air strikes had slowed the NVA's advance, but could not save Quang Tri. The loss of Quang Tri was blamed on poor leadership and the Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, was replaced by Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong.¹⁸

Once in charge, Truong reorganized his defenses, and established a Fire Support Coordination Center where he integrated land and naval surface-to-surface fires with air support. The defenders at Hue held their ground with help from B-52s and other allied aircraft bombing the attackers with devastating effect. Once the forward momentum of the NVA was stopped, the ARVN counterattacked, setting their sights on re-capturing Quang Tri. With air strikes leading the way, they surrounded Quang Tri and laid siege to the town. Tactical fighters and B-52s eventually leveled the town and the enemy defenders inside it. The battle for Quang Tri ultimately lasted months, but the town and most of the province ended up in the hands of the South Vietnamese.¹⁹

The Battle for Kontum in Military Region II

The attacks in the Central Highlands came slightly later than the other two MRs. Moderate scale attacks on MR II's fire support bases (FSBs) began on 30 March. Within a few days, pressure intensified on more than a dozen posts, including the positions on

the ridge west of Kontum and Dak To. Communist objectives included several bases and towns in the highlands, with the goal of establishing political control of the region. Other attacks on district towns in coastal regions, and against supply lines connecting Pleiku to the coast, threatened to divide Vietnam in half. In order to save Kontum from falling to the enemy, America's senior advisor to the region, John Paul Vann, relied heavily on airpower and artillery. Vann made extensive use of B-52s conducting massive "Arc Light" air strikes into boxes set up for that very purpose. In the end, Kontum was saved and the North Vietnamese were defeated.²⁰

The Siege of An Loc

The North Vietnamese attacks into MR III led to the longest siege of the entire war, resulting in a savage battle for survival for An Loc's desperate South Vietnamese forces and their American advisors. The attacks began with a diversion by the NVA in Tay Ninh Province, followed by a full-scale assault by three Communist divisions into adjacent Binh Long Province. The main objectives in Binh Long were the towns and airfields in Loc Ninh, An Loc, and Quan Loi, along with positions astride Highway 13, the main roadway connecting the region with Saigon. The ARVN clearly understood the danger of losing these decisive points, as they could have been used as staging points for follow-on attacks into Saigon itself. As the NVA pressed its attacks, Loc Ninh fell, primarily due to poor ARVN leadership and sheer numbers of NVA. Soon the North's troops had advanced to An Loc, where they cut off the defenders and besieged the town. With NVA artillery raining down on their positions day after day, the ARVN and their US advisors could do little more than hang on in the southern half of the town.²¹

Stretched to the limit, the Americans were forced to airdrop food, ammunition, and other critical supplies using primarily C-130s. These dangerous missions into small well-defended drop zones resulted in the loss of several US aircraft, and unfortunately much of the airdropped supplies fell beyond the reach of the ARVN into enemy hands. However, enough supplies reached the defenders to enable them to stave off repeated enemy attacks and constant artillery bombardments, allowing the precious necessary extra time for rescuing ARVN forces to break through to the city from the south, ending the siege.²²

As in the other regions, US airpower, directed by airborne forward air controllers (FACs) and American advisors on the ground in the city, was absolutely devastating to the NVA. In particular, B-52s, once again unloading bombs into Arc Light boxes drawn up by the American advisors, decimated attacking Communist forces at pivotal points in several key battles in the southern half of the An Loc.²³

Airpower's Contribution

Clearly airpower was an integral part of South Vietnam's defense against the Easter Offensive. In fact, its effects were decisive in all three MRs that bore the brunt of the Communist attacks. Can airpower be singled out as "the" decisive factor that led to the defeat of North Vietnamese forces in the Easter Offensive? To help answer that question, chapter 4 of this thesis will further analyze airpower's contribution. First, South Vietnam's tactical air control system (TACS) will be examined, including its basic structure and how it was affected by Vietnamization. Next, the analysis will explore the impressive employment of US airpower into theater to blunt the NVA offensive leading to a large and varied air order of battle. In addition, the strategic bombing campaign

against North Vietnam will be examined, particularly Operation Linebacker I and II. Finally, it will look at innovative airpower tactics, techniques, and procedures used during the Easter Offensive, including the use of B-52s and fixed-wing gunships in the CAS role.

The Theater Air Control System

American airpower in Vietnam used a centralized control system, where sorties were planned and executed at the central Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) at Tan Son Nhut and at each of the local direct air support centers (DASCs) located in each corps zone. The TACC is somewhat analogous to the Air Operations Centers used today as the command and control “hub” for centralized control of joint airpower, and the DASCs are the Vietnam equivalent of today’s USAF Air Support Operations Centers, assisting in the execution of CAS to Army units. The TACC would initially control an air strike asset in support of the Army and then “hand off” the sorties to the DASC for direct tasking to a FAC attached to an Army unit. Like the rest of South Vietnam, responsibility for the TACS was being shifted to South Vietnamese forces. This process was in various stages of completion, with USAF air liaison officers (ALOs) nearly completing their drawdown in each of the MRs, but as the Easter Offensive played out, it is clear that much improvement was still needed by the VNAF before it would be effective without US assistance.

Forward Air Controllers

As a forward extension of the TACC, the FAC, who directed air strikes, was usually one of two primary “types.” First, the “ground” FAC, or ALO, was a fighter pilot

usually attached to an army brigade or echelon above, although sometimes down to battalion level. The ALO directed air strikes in support of his unit and subordinate echelons. In 1972, ground FACs were all but gone from the battlefield as the American conventional forces were leaving Vietnam for home. The other type of FAC used in great abundance during the Vietnam War was the Airborne FAC, or FAC-A. These pilots directed CAS from the sky, where they had a “birds-eye” view of the battlefield. The primary FAC-A aircraft that operated during the latter stages of the Vietnam war were the O-2 and the OV-10 Bronco. VNAF FACs were still using the older O-1s. The fixed-wing gunship pilots also became FAC-A qualified.

US Deploys More Airpower

Just prior to the Easter Offensive, the US still had 800 aircraft of all varieties in Vietnam and Thailand; 363 were strike variants, including 211 F-4s and 52 B-52s. Additionally, two US Navy carrier air wings were also in theater. The VNAF had nearly 1,300 aircraft of its own, a significant force numerically, but was in many respects unprepared to respond to the huge offensive launched by the Communist north.²⁴ Once the US realized the size and scope of the Easter Offensive and the gravity of the situation, the decision was made to compensate for the continued drawdown of US ground forces with additional strike aircraft and more airlift and tankers.

Thus the US undertook a rapid global mobility response unlike any in the history of warfare up to that time. By 11 April, just 13 days after the first shots of the Easter Offensive were fired, Nixon deployed an additional 92 Air Force fighters and 91 B-52s from bases in the US. In addition, two more aircraft carriers were sent into the waters off Vietnam. By 23 May, 108 more fighters and 70 more B-52s had arrived, plus two more

aircraft carriers, bringing the total to six.²⁵ It was with this giant armada of combat airpower that the US delivered the knock-out blow to the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

Strategic Bombing

To help counter the NVA invasion, President Nixon removed many political restrictions against targets in North Vietnam and ordered his commanders to begin a new strategic bombing campaign against the Communists. This campaign was soon to be named Operation Linebacker, and it gradually increased in intensity, first targeting the massive fuel storage facility at Haiphong, and then reaching key strategic targets throughout all of North Vietnam. These attacks sent an important psychological message to North Vietnam that Nixon was willing to risk his newly forged relationships with the Soviet and Chinese governments by doing everything short of reintroducing American ground forces to save South Vietnam. Additionally, Linebacker's interdiction campaign was vastly more effective than Commando Hunt or Rolling Thunder, not just because of the improved target sets in North Vietnam, but also because the NVA were now attempting to support heavy, sustained ground combat of large mechanized forces, requiring a much greater logistical effort than smaller scale attacks and guerilla warfare.

Creative Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

The US military in Vietnam displayed innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures in adapting to the unique environment confronting them during the offensive. One of the most effective changes they made was shifting the fixed-wing gunships from what was primarily a deep interdiction mission along the Ho Chi Minh trail, to a CAS

role. Long loiter times, persistent fire support, and night capabilities made these AC-130s, AC-119s, and the AC-47s (flown by Vietnamese-only aircrew by 1972) so effective.

The strike boxes developed for B-52s turned this one-time “strategic” bomber into a devastating CAS platform, turning areas foaming with enemy attackers into vast wastelands where men and equipment were scattered in mixed piles of death and destruction. Another effective tactical innovation was the use of laser-guided bombs (LGBs) as precision CAS weapons against mobile targets, particularly armor. Finally, after years of practice and refinement, the FAC-As operated at absolute peak efficiency during the Easter Offensive. As the airborne link between the US advisors on the ground and the air support in the sky, these daring aviators were constantly improvising innovative solutions to rain down airborne fires in support of the friendly forces on the ground.

The US TACS, the FAC-A mission, the massive US air armada, and the on-the-fly innovations in airpower were more than the North Vietnamese forces could handle. The Communists no longer had an air-to-air capability to compete with the US for air superiority, even though the NVA pushed some SA-2 strategic SAMs into some battle areas along with short-range SA-7s, and some anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), which did take a somewhat significant toll on USAF and VNAF aircraft. However, these losses, in their totality, were not heavy enough to significantly degrade the overall successful air support to the ARVN.

After looking at the Easter Offensive from the perspective of all three levels of war, strategic, operational and tactical, combined with an analysis of airpowers

contribution, this paper will wrap up with its conclusions, along with the relevance of the Easter Offensive to today's US military environment in the final chapter.

¹MACV Commander General Creighton W. Abrams summing up his view of airpower's contribution to the 1972 defense of South Vietnam. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999), 158.

²John A. Doglione, Donald T. Hogg, Richard D. Kimball, Julian R. McFadden, John M. Rapp, Ray Y. Walden, Lorenz F. Wustner, Charles W. Bond, Eugene T. Buckner, Norman Edgar, Robert L. Evers, James R. Harding, and Frank T. Hines, *Airpower and the 1972 Spring Invasion* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1978), 102.

³Ibid., 103.

⁴Ibid., 104.

⁵Ibid., 107.

⁶James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost His War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 13.

⁷ Ibid, 18-19.

⁸Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle, Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Topeka, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 7.

⁹Doglione et al., 100.

¹⁰Ibid., 99.

¹¹Gerald H. Turley, *The Easter Offensive: Vietnam, 1972* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), vii.

¹²Doglione et al., 99.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Andrade, 25.

¹⁶Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 33-40.

¹⁷Andrade, 51

¹⁸Ibid., 142.

¹⁹Ibid., 158-197.

²⁰Ibid., 201-229.

²¹James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1-127.

²²Ibid., 103-110.

²³Ibid., 157-161.

²⁴Doglione et al., 112.

²⁵Ibid., 124-125.

CHAPTER 2

THE EASTER OFFENSIVE: THE STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL VIEW

A costly battle is ahead. Victory is in sight.¹

North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap

Prelude to Invasion: 1969 to 1971

Nearing the end of a turbulent decade that included race riots, the sexual revolution, large increased drug use by younger generations, and an escalation of US involvement in the increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam, Richard Milhous Nixon was elected President of the United States in 1968. After taking office, one of Nixon's primary objectives was to withdraw the US military from Vietnam without disgrace, achieving the so-called "peace with honor." But bringing American forces home, while still leaving South Vietnam in a position to defend itself, was a very difficult task to undertake. To deal with this complex challenge, Nixon and his staff developed a plan with the following goals: (1) reverse "Americanization" that had occurred from 1965 to 1968, concentrating instead on Vietnamization, (2) give greater priority to pacification, (3) reduce the Communists' invasion threat by destroying enemy sanctuaries and supply lines in Laos and Cambodia, (4) withdraw American troops without collapsing South Vietnam, (5) negotiate a cease-fire and a peace treaty, and (6) demonstrate a willingness to support South Vietnam with military aid if the North continued to be supplied by China and the Soviet Union.²

Nixon's first goal, reversing Americanization, was designed to reverse the overwhelming trend of American forces leading the fight in all major engagements against North Vietnam, and instead train South Vietnamese forces to lead the effort. With

the vast buildup of conventional US forces between 1965 and 1968, American military leaders focused primarily on defeating the VC and the NVA. Their second priority was training the ARVN and VNAF. Not surprisingly, US forces continued to lead the charge against Communist forces on the battlefield, but the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese forces languished.³ With US forces leading the fight, in the 1968 Communist Tet Offensive alone, between 32,000 and 58,000 Communist troops were killed.⁴ Unfortunately, although inflicting high losses on the enemy, US forces suffered losses themselves that were unacceptably high to a large percentage of the US population.

Nixon's Defense Secretary Melvin Laird recognized the focus of the US' operational strategy in Vietnam was focused on America's forces, not South Vietnamese forces. Americans were doing the majority of the heavy fighting. Laird realized that without a change in strategy, America could never remove its forces from the conflict without dooming South Vietnam to defeat. Laird was a politically savvy former US Congressman who at times placed more importance on how strategic military decisions would play back home with Congress and the American people than the battlefield. In the words of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Jerry Friedman, Laird was, "more interested in ending the war than winning it."⁵ Friedman's assessment notwithstanding, Laird's focus on Vietnamization (a term he coined) was well-founded because he correctly assessed that without a more capable South Vietnamese military, Nixon's peace with honor strategy would never stick, even if an agreement was eventually signed.⁶ Thus, Laird directed a shift in MACV's focus, directing General Abrams and his staff to come up with a plan for the defense of South Vietnam "*without* US forces."⁷

Nixon's second goal, an increased focus on pacification, was well-timed. The defeat of the 1968 Tet Offensive, while negatively impacting US public opinion towards the war, was a stunning military victory for the US and South Vietnam. In fact, banking on victory, North Vietnam threw nearly its entire VC force in South Vietnam into the fight. The VC forces suffered devastating losses. This dramatic weakening of the VC provided an opportunity. With a new emphasis on improving infrastructure and stability in areas all across South Vietnam, the US hoped to keep the VC from reforming as a threat and improve domestic support for Thieu from within South Vietnam.

Nixon's third goal, reducing the Communist invasion threat by destroying enemy sanctuaries and supply lines in Laos and Cambodia, was arguably the most difficult of his six goals to achieve. The US was not at war with Laos or Cambodia, and thus in most circumstances, refused to allow conventional ground forces access to those two countries. Meanwhile, the governments of Laos and Cambodia either would not, in the case of Laos, or could not, as was the case with Cambodia, prevent North Vietnam from using their far eastern provinces to flow men, equipment, and other supplies into South Vietnam. These circumstances forced the US to rely primarily on its special forces and airpower in an attempt to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail inside those two nations.

As previously stated, air interdiction efforts during Operation Rolling Thunder (1965 to 1968) and Operation Commando Hunt (1968 to 1970) failed to significantly impede the flow of men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail in spite of the tremendous amount of munitions expended towards this effort. The NVA marginalized air interdiction efforts by dispersing, using heavy jungle canopies, and operating at night. Even though these strikes were sometimes tactically devastating, operationally they were

nothing more than inconvenient temporary delays for the NVA who were determined to keep the trail open. Laos and Cambodia continued to be a sanctuary from which the NVA launched strikes against South Vietnam.

In 1970, however, Nixon and Thieu decided to invade Cambodia using a mix of US and ARVN troops assisted by airpower to clear the Cambodian border areas. This invasion caused wide spread public protest in the US in spite of the fact that the action had 50 percent public support, according to polls.⁸ Nixon declared the operation a success. However, in spite of large amounts of enemy equipment captured and supplies destroyed, the effort was plagued with problems. The action was hampered by poor leadership, organizational problems, politicalization of senior officers, and the inability to provide adequate combat support and logistical sustainment difficulties.⁹ If this was the first test of Vietnamization, the results were certainly mixed.

A second effort to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail, this time in Laos, was Operation Lam Son 719 in 1971. This was exclusively a South Vietnamese operation, assisted only by US airpower. Designed to clear out enemy sanctuaries in several different areas within Laos, this action (plagued by many failures) was considered a debacle by almost all accounts. South Vietnamese forces, who deployed without their US advisors, were unable to coordinate their own fire support and were very dependent on US fire support. This failed operation, along with unsuccessful attacks into Cambodia clearly indicated that heading into 1972, Vietnamization still had a long way to go. Worse yet, buildup of forces, equipment, and supplies via the Ho Chi Minh trail would significantly boost the NVA in the early stages of the Easter Offensive.

Nixon's fourth goal, withdrawal of all American forces without collapsing Vietnam, was an objective that touched all elements of US national power: diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. Diplomatically, the Nixon administration had to convince Thieu that although the US was withdrawing its forces, it was not simply abandoning South Vietnam. However, it was not just the South Vietnamese president that the US had to convince, but also Thieu's military and civilian population. Without public confidence that he could protect the south from communist invasion, either on their own or if necessary with US assistance, Thieu would be ripe for overthrow, either by internal coup, or ultimately by external invasion from the North.

Abrams faced an extremely difficult military challenge. He faced a massive train-up effort unlike any the US had ever attempted, and he didn't have a lot of time. Economically, large amounts of short- and long-term aid would be required to properly organize, train, and equip the South Vietnamese military to stand on its own and to continue public projects under the pacification program.

Nixon's fifth goal, negotiating a cease-fire and achieving a negotiated peace settlement, was primarily a diplomatic effort, led ably by his key national security advisors Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig. From the earliest days of peace negotiations, North Vietnam always demanded that any settlement must include Thieu's removal. Said Nixon, "They would haggle about details, but on the bottom line they never wavered, they would not agree to a settlement unless we agreed to overthrow Thieu."¹⁰ Thieu, for his part, declared that the South Vietnamese government would not participate in the Paris peace talks.¹¹ Negotiations were initially held in secret, and were largely unproductive as neither side was willing to make significant concessions. The

American negotiating team was led by Kissinger and the North Vietnamese by Le Duc Tho, who consistently frustrated the American side with his diatribes against US actions and the South Vietnamese government. Nixon finally went public with negotiations on 25 January 1972, just two months prior to the Easter Offensive.¹²

Nixon's sixth goal was to demonstrate a willingness to stand by South Vietnam, providing military aid as long as China and the Soviet Union continued to supply North Vietnam. This goal was fraught with problems, the primary one being that Nixon did not have the authority to ensure its completion. North Vietnam leaders had shown great patience with their own goal of unifying Vietnam under communist rule, and could certainly out-wait Nixon, who could only serve a maximum of eight years in office. Additionally, it was the US Congress who ultimately controlled the purse-strings, and with the war growing less popular with each passing year, matching China and the Soviet Union, dollar-for-dollar year-after-year once the US pullout was complete was problematic at best.

Shortly after taking office, Nixon announced that US troop withdrawal would begin 1 July 1969, starting a withdrawal sequence that left just 158,000 US forces in the Vietnam area of operations by the end of 1971, with just 139,000 forces in country.¹³ Additionally, in January 1972 Nixon approved the withdrawal of 70,000 more American troops from Vietnam over the next three months, leaving only 69,000 remaining by the first of May.¹⁴ In contrast, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) grew from 825,000 to over 1 million men and women during that same time period. They also capitalized on massive amounts of American aid to modernize their equipment. In spite

of the steady withdrawal of US forces, Americans continued to fight and die in Vietnam. More than 20,000 US servicemen lost their lives between 1969 and 1972.¹⁵

With Nixon keeping his promise to the American public by withdrawing more than 300,000 forces by 1972, and with the promise that all remaining American GIs would soon follow, why did North Vietnam launch the Easter Offensive in 1972? Giap convinced North Vietnam's inner circle that the time was right for the Easter Offensive for several reasons. First, many in the north believed that both Vietnamization and pacification were working. Nixon, himself shared this view, noting in his diary that he saw the invasion as a sign of desperation, a sign that Vietnamization was working.¹⁶ Add to this the fact that 1972 was an election year, and leaders in North Vietnam viewed any Democratic challenger as likely to withdraw the US from the war under conditions more favorable to the Communists.¹⁷ Thus, with a reduced VC threat left in the south and an RVNAF that was getting stronger with each passing day, the risk of waiting too long to invade was untenable. North Vietnam could not risk the balance of power shifting from north to south along with a re-elected Nixon to contend with for four more years. Given these factors, they decided in 1971 to build up forces in preparation for a 1972 spring invasion.

By 1972, Nixon's Vietnamization plan had been going for three years, but just how effective it had been was not clear. Abrams and his MACV staff gave Nixon an optimistic assessment of South Vietnam's military capability. Defense Department civilians and the State Department, however, were more pessimistic.¹⁸ The issue was not whether or not Thieu's military had made equipment and technological improvements, since by the end of 1972 the RVNAF had the most modern military force in Southeast

Asia.¹⁹ The issue was not really one of training, either, as the US military had done an adequate job of training the ARVN and VNAF in conventional military tactics. The question was, did South Vietnam's military, and in particular its army, have the leadership and the will to stand on its own and fight the highly motivated NVA? The answer to this key issue was very hard to predict until actual large-scale battles took place. The previously mentioned Cambodian and Laos incursions yielded mixed opinions on how well the ARVN performed. In the Cambodian operation, results were mixed, while the ARVN performance in Laos was poor. How would the ARVN perform against the looming Easter Offensive? Abrams, for one, felt it was ready, noting "state of readiness, the alertness and activity on the part of the armed forces here in this country is the highest that I've ever seen it"²⁰ Was Abrams correct? Time would soon tell.

1972: The Offensive

At noon on 30 March 1972, the Easter Offensive began with Hanoi launching what would eventually become a fourteen division attack with over 1,200 tanks and armored vehicles and 120,000 troops.²¹ Unlike Tet in 1968, this attack was strictly a straightforward conventional offensive, with minimal VC assistance. On the first day, the attack began in MR I, with mortars, rockets, and artillery followed by ground attacks the next day. Next, NVA forces plunged into MRs II in the Central Highlands and in MR III, just 100 kilometers north of Saigon.²² This would be the war's most serious challenge to South Vietnam's sovereignty.

Once the severity of the attacks became apparent, Nixon and his staff knew this would be the biggest test of Vietnamization to date, with Kissinger noting, "We would now see whether the effort and agony of the past three years had been productive or

would vanish like a wisp of smoke in the breeze.”²³ Kissinger also saw the larger strategic implications of the attack, noting, “I was convinced that whatever the outcome of the offensive, it would end the war. This was Hanoi’s last throw of the dice. One way or another, there would now be serious negotiations; their substance would depend upon which side prevailed on the battlefield.”²⁴

Nixon knew that South Vietnam had to succeed. If the South collapsed as a result of the invasion, Nixon said, “The foreign policy of the United State will have been destroyed, and the Soviets will have established that they can accomplish what they are after by using the force of arms in third countries. Defeat was simply not an option.”²⁵

For his part, Nixon did everything he could to prevent Saigon’s defeat, with one big exception. He would not reverse the aggressive US ground troop withdrawal schedule. With his decision to rely on the ARVN and their US ground advisors, and with failure not an option, Nixon had only one decisive element of military power left to inject into the fight: airpower. With insufficient US aircraft in theater to handle Hanoi’s ferocious attack, Nixon ordered several hundred additional aircraft into the theater over the first six weeks of the offensive. This massive air armada would be the key “equalizer” for the south, counter-balancing the north’s advantage on the ground.

Even though the NVA had made significant advances in the first three weeks of the offensive, on 24 April, General Abrams called Defense Secretary Laird and told him he was still optimistic, believing the ARVN were holding on reasonably well.²⁶ In early May, however, the South Vietnamese suffered a series of battlefield setbacks so severe that Abrams told Laird, “The situation has changed significantly since my assessment of 24 April.”²⁷ In MR I, Dong Ha had fallen. Quang Tri combat base had been evacuated,

and Quang Tri City, overwhelmed by 40,000 attackers and outnumbered three to one, was seriously threatened and would soon fall. Blocking positions had fallen, leaving Hue on the brink of devastation. Abrams then reported to Laird and Thieu, “the pressure has mounted and the battle has become brutal. The senior military leadership has begun to bend and, in some cases, to break. In adversity it is losing its will and cannot be depended on to take the measures necessary to stand and fight.”²⁸ In short order, Quang Tri fell and Hue was in serious trouble. South Vietnam seemed on the teetering edge of total collapse.

Strategically, Nixon was in a very difficult position. The situation on the battlefield in Vietnam was bad, which brought the peace negotiations with Hanoi to a standstill, as North Vietnam had no need to negotiate with the NVA doing so well. Additionally, Nixon was involved in historic summit preparations with the Soviet Union and was also making landmark progress in his improving relationship with Chinese leaders. Finally, he was facing an increasingly hostile anti-war Congress and public. He reasoned that his best course-of-action was most likely to unleash devastating strategic bombing and interdiction in North Vietnam. These drastically escalated air attacks were risky. They could have potentially jeopardized the Soviet summit, set back thawing relations with China, and further eroded public support for his actions in Vietnam. Additionally, he risked Congress cutting off funding for the war which would kill his efforts to save South Vietnam. In the midst of all this, four Soviet merchant ships were mistakenly struck by US aircraft. The Soviets protested, but as Nixon noted in his memoirs, “Diplomatically it was interesting- and important- these protests were kept relatively low key.”²⁹ Nixon, who was clearly agonizing over the decision of whether or not to “take off the gloves,” detected other subtle signals from the Soviets and China

which led him to believe that although they would protest, they would not allow an escalation of bombing in North Vietnam to jeopardize thawing relations between themselves and the US. He also gambled that he could escalate the bombing and not totally lose the Congress or the American people, at least not before he could negotiate a palatable peace with Hanoi. In the end, Nixon decided that he had to do everything he could with airpower to save South Vietnam.³⁰

Nixon had already been bombing selective targets in North Vietnam in Operation Linebacker since 6 April, and ten days later ordered a devastating B-52 attack on the fuel storage tanks at Haiphong, which set spectacular fires that, reflected by cloud and smoke, could be seen 110 miles away.³¹ Nixon noted afterward, “Well, we really left them our calling card this weekend.”³²

Unfortunately, these limited attacks were not enough. With the loss of Quang Tri, Hue in jeopardy and An Loc surrounded, Nixon decided to mine Haiphong Harbor to shut down North Vietnam’s vital sea line of supply, and to intensify Linebacker by extending it to areas throughout North Vietnam.³³ After receiving several timid bombing proposals from the Defense Department and National Security Council (NSC), Nixon wrote, “Having gone through the agony of making the decision and having accepted the political risk it would involve, I was determined to have it carried out the way I intended.”³⁴ He then penned the following note to the Defense Department and the NSC: “For once, I want the military and I want the NSC staff to come up with some ideas on their own which will recommend *action* which is very *strong*, threatening and *effective*.”³⁵ With the political constraints removed, American airpower finally got the opportunity to deliver what US Air Force leaders had promised.

Linebacker yielded vastly better results than Rolling Thunder. During Linebacker, American aircraft attacked airfields, power plants, and radio stations which disrupted the flow of supplies and reinforcements to units fighting in the South. In addition to heavy attacks on new target sets in North Vietnam, another important reason for Linebacker's improved success was the fact that the NVA was now engaged in heavy conventional combat in South Vietnam, as opposed to smaller-scale attacks and guerilla warfare that was prevalent prior to the Easter Offensive. Because heavy ground combat requires much larger logistical support, successful interdiction has a much greater effect on front-line forces that are reliant on large amounts of re-supply. LGBs proved effective, especially against bridges, severing the bridge at Thanh Hoa, which had survived Rolling Thunder, and the highway and railroad bridges over the Red River at Hanoi.³⁶ These air attacks, combined with new tactical battlefield successes in all three contested MRs in South Vietnam, made leaders in Hanoi more susceptible to compromise.

While specifics of the attacks in all three MRs will be covered in detail in chapter 3, and airpower's contribution to the fight will be covered in chapter 4, a few strategic and operational points must be made. First, as B-52s began to make their operational presence felt beginning in late April, they also began to make a significant difference in the tactical fights as well; dropping into strike boxes in three-ship "ARC LIGHT" formation. In an innovative move, Abrams decided to mass all the B-52 CAS in one MR each day for three consecutive days on 11, 12, and 13 May. US advisors were ordered to mass their B-52s in the defense of An Loc, Hue, and Kontum. Thus, the devastating effect of all of the B-52 CAS for a given day being dropped in and around one city for an

entire twenty-four hour period (three B-52s every 55 minutes) absolutely pulverized the enemy caught in the onslaught.³⁷ This was a very effective operational strategy.

The operational and tactical success of the B-52 was only possible because of Nixon's decision to rapidly deploy more than 160 B-52s to the region in less than two months after the Hanoi began the Easter Offensive, 90 arriving within the first two weeks. This rapid global mobility was also responsible for four additional aircraft carriers and over 200 Air Force fighters that significantly added to the CAS and interdiction capability that General Abrams and his advisors used so effectively against the NVA.³⁸

With regard to operational art, Hanoi made several questionable decisions in prosecuting their attacks. First, the NVA attacked along a broad front into all three widely spaced MRs simultaneously. Thus, they were able to tactically mass at various points within the three main battle areas, but they were unable to operationally mass in large numbers to exploit their early gains. They could not reinforce success. This was exacerbated by the fact that NVA forces were hindered by exterior lines-of-operation, leaving them unable to easily shift their main effort across the regions. If they had elected to fix the ARVN with smaller forces in two of the three regions, then used excess forces to mount a decisive attack in a third region, they would have had a better chance at an early breakthrough. But, by attacking along the three fronts, their slow initial advance allowed US airpower time to flow into theater and halt further significant enemy advances. The Communists were stopped, and eventually they were driven back toward their original lines, with Quang Tri City holding out until September before finally being retaken by the ARVN. True operational-level mass was never achieved. This operational flaw was a symptom of a larger strategic error by Hanoi's leaders: They clearly did not

anticipate that Nixon would rush such large amounts of additional firepower into the theater and as a result the Communists underestimated the impact US airpower would have on the battlefield and on their rear areas in North Vietnam.³⁹

Another ill-fated choice by Giap was to fight unnecessary battles of attrition at fixed points that could have been by-passed. A perfect example of this was the NVA siege at An Loc. They could have by-passed this strategically unimportant city and headed straight for Saigon, the jewel in the crown of South Vietnam. In MR III, Saigon was clearly the center of gravity, not the ARVN fielded forces, and certainly not An Loc. Additionally, by surrounding the cities of An Loc and Kontum, the NVA did not give the beleaguered and battered ARVN soldiers in those cities a “back door” through which they could flee, which may have handed the cities to the NVA without further losses. By closing the back door, the NVA left the ARVN soldiers with no choice but to stand and fight or surrender. In the case of An Loc and Kontum, the choice was to fight, and ultimately the cities were never taken by the NVA during this offensive.⁴⁰

By mid-May, the situation in South Vietnam was much better. The Communists offensive stalled after taking Quang Tri, and the tide began to turn in all three MRs. In late June, I Corps Commander Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, who had earlier replaced the ineffective Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, went on the offensive. He drove back enemy forces and eventually retook Quang Tri City. In MR III, An Loc, although severely battered and bruised, had survived its siege, and reinforcements broke through from the South, driving back the NVA. Kontum held, thanks in no small part to the heroic leadership of the senior American advisor John Paul Vann, who was killed in a helicopter crash after the tide of the battle had been turned in the favor of the south. In

addition to Vann and US airpower, the VNAF in the fight for Kontum was “absolutely magnificent.”⁴¹ The audacious and ambitious 1972 spring offensive, which began with a flourish of battlefield success, was defeated by a just good enough RVNAF, a small band of courageous US advisors, and a large quantity of very effective US airpower.

The NVA were slowly repelled throughout the rest of 1972, while Nixon attempted to negotiate a cease-fire and subsequent peace treaty with North Vietnam. The NVA suffered more than 100,000 casualties in its attacking force of 200,000, with as many as 40,000 killed. It lost more than one half its tanks and heavy artillery pieces. It took nearly three years to recover from this offensive before they could launch another, and Giap was eased out as the commander of Hanoi’s army.⁴²

US advisors and airpower were key ingredients to the victory. The advisors were a bedrock of resolve and morale to the ARVN, and provided a sense of ground truth to the US commanders. Often in desperate situations, they took defacto command.⁴³ On airpower’s contribution, Abrams stated, “this government would now have fallen, and this country would now be gone, and we wouldn’t be meeting here today, if it hadn’t been for the B52s and the tac air.”⁴⁴ While advisors and airpower were key, what about the ARVN?

Overall, the ARVN was plagued by poor leadership, particularly at the senior levels, and it was not up to the level of the NVA. At the soldier level, however, the ARVN showed that when they were adequately led, they performed ably. Furthermore, both airpower and US advisors could not have defeated the communist attackers by themselves. As Abrams put it, “without some ARVN standing and fighting, 10 times the air couldn’t have stopped them.”⁴⁵ Nixon played up the role of the ARVN, while

downplaying the US military role. Politically, he needed to show that Vietnamization was working, both for continued US domestic support and to keep the US position as strong as possible as he continued peace talks with Hanoi.⁴⁶

In October 1972, a peace agreement was nearly at hand. There were just two sticking points left: the release of all VC prisoners and the return of military equipment, or arms replacement. South Vietnam did not want VC prisoners released because Thieu believed it could have a destabilizing effect on the pacification program, as well as weaken popular support for Thieu himself. North Vietnam had made major concessions to reach this point, most notably agreeing to allow Thieu to remain in power. However, in a stunning blow to Nixon and Kissinger, Thieu rejected the agreement. The South Vietnamese President had three main objections to the pact. First, the agreement failed to establish the DMZ as a secure border. Second, it allowed the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord to potentially become a coalition government, and finally, it allowed North Vietnamese troops to stay in South Vietnam.⁴⁷ Thieu's reservations were not unreasonable. With NVA soldiers permitted to stay, there was the possibility that the new National Council could eventually become dominated by Communists or other potential enemies of Thieu's regime. Despite diplomatic pressure from both Kissinger and Nixon, Thieu held his ground, and the peace talks were suspended until mid-November, after US elections.

Although Nixon easily won re-election, he warned Thieu that the new Congress set to take office in mid-January was likely to be more "dovish" on Vietnam and could severely restrict or completely cut off funding for South Vietnam.⁴⁸ So, it was imperative that an agreement be reached before then. Thieu still objected to Hanoi's troops on his

soil, but Nixon assured him that America would come to Saigon's aid should Hanoi break the agreement. Nixon gave Thieu an 8 December deadline to accept the treaty. If Thieu did not come along, Nixon would sign the agreement with North Vietnam separately. Sensing an opportunity to exploit a split developing between the US and South Vietnam, Hanoi began backing off the agreement.⁴⁹ On 30 November, Nixon met with Haig, Kissinger, and Laird and stated that he would give Hanoi one final chance. If they balked, or if they violated a reached agreement, there must be contingency plans for massive bombing campaigns of North Vietnam. Nixon emphasized, "If Hanoi violates an agreement, our response must be all out. We must maintain enough force in the area to do the job, and it can't be a weak response. Above all, B-52s are to be targeted on Hanoi. We must have our own unilateral capability to prevent violations."⁵⁰ After another round of negotiations in early December, Nixon and Kissinger concluded that Hanoi was indeed stalling and an agreement was now unlikely. Thieu did not help matters by request numerous changes to the agreement. The talks broke off, and Nixon was forced to make good on his promise for devastating unilateral action.

Operation Linebacker II commenced on 18 December, with powerful B-52 strikes on Hanoi, Haiphong, and against other strategic targets throughout North Vietnam. The operation employed airpower to its maximum capabilities in an attempt to destroy all major target complexes, such as radio stations, railroads, power plants, and airfields. In addition to suffering under these new large-scale air attacks, Hanoi had expended virtually all of its SAMs at attacking US aircraft, successfully knocking down twenty-six. Thus, with its SAMs virtually eliminated, Hanoi lay defenseless to stop further US attacks. Finally, by 29 December more than 700 nighttime sorties flown by B-52s and

650 daytime strikes flown by fighter and attack aircraft had pummeled North Vietnam. These attacks were a key ingredient that led the North Vietnamese government to return to the conference table.⁵¹

By 11 January, a basic agreement was reached, and on 15 January all bombing and mining of North Vietnam stopped. After heavy pressure, Thieu agreed to the terms of the agreement. The formal peace agreement was signed by all parties on 27 January 1973. The last US troops left Vietnam on 29 March, 1973. Nixon had his peace with honor, at least for the time being, and Thieu had a serious challenge on his hands now that the only support he had from the US was indirect economic and military financial aid, coming in substantially smaller amounts with each new US budget.

Post-script: 1973 to 1975

With US forces gone, many confrontations occurred between north and south between 1973 and the beginning of 1975. The ARVN fought pretty well throughout 1973 and in the early part of 1974, but the strengthening NVA began to wear them out. North Vietnam used this time to resupply and reinforce its units in South Vietnam and the scales of power tipped their way throughout 1974. In December of that year, North Vietnam launched probing attacks in the Phuoc Long Province to test both South Vietnam's strength and the US response. These attacks were very successful and the NVA continued their push into South Vietnam. Provinces began falling like dominos and by 1 April, NVA forces held all of MR I and most of MR II.⁵² North Vietnam decided to move up their ultimate reunification plan and now moved quickly on the rest of South Vietnam. On 21 April, faced with the decision to resign on his own, or be forced out by his generals, Thieu stepped down.⁵³ He blamed America for failing to live up to its

promises. Unfortunately, by this point, Nixon had resigned. Despite his promises that America would come to Saigon's defense should the north violate the agreement, Congress and the American people had moved on, and there was no political will to get re-involved in the Vietnam conflict.⁵⁴ Saigon fell on 30 April.⁵⁵ Just three years removed from devastating losses inflicted by the US and South Vietnam during the Easter Offensive, North Vietnam's twenty-five year patient and determined struggle to unite Vietnam under communist rule had finally succeeded.

¹North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap in a December 1971 speech, just three months prior to the beginning of the Easter Offensive. Sorley, 309.

²Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 18, 19.

³*Ibid.*, 10, 11, 28.

⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

⁵*Ibid.*, 14.

⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

⁷*Ibid.*, 28.

⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

⁹*Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁰Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Grosset and Dunlap, 1975), 583.

¹¹Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 7.

¹²Nixon, 585.

¹³Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 2, 16, 123.

¹⁴Nixon, 584.

¹⁵Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 9.

- ¹⁶Nixon, 587.
- ¹⁷Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 125.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, 36.
- ²⁰Sorley, 309.
- ²¹Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 3.
- ²²Sorley, 321.
- ²³ Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 1098.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, 1098.
- ²⁵Nixon, 588.
- ²⁶Sorley, 325.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, 328.
- ²⁸*Ibid.* Two ARVN leaders who were exceptions to this poor leadership were IV Corps and later I Corps Commander Lieutenant General Truong and 1st Division Commander Phu.
- ²⁹Nixon, 591.
- ³⁰Sorley, 326.
- ³¹Air Force History, Operation LINEBACKER, Available from <https://www.airforce.history.hq.af.mil/PopTopics/linebacker1.htm>; Internet; accessed on 10 December 2005.
- ³²Nixon, 590.
- ³³*Ibid.*, 605.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 606.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, 607.
- ³⁶Air Force History, Operation LINEBACKER.
- ³⁷Sorley, 334.

- ³⁸Doglione et al., 112.
- ³⁹Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 154.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 154.
- ⁴¹Sorley, 338.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, 339.
- ⁴³Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 159.
- ⁴⁴Sorley, 327-328.
- ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 325.
- ⁴⁶Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 160-161.
- ⁴⁷Nixon, 703.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 718.
- ⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 718-20.
- ⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 724.
- ⁵¹Air Force History, Operation LINEBACKER 2, Available from <https://www.airforcehistory.hq.af.mil/PopTopics/linebacker2.htm>; Internet; accessed on 10 December 2005.
- ⁵²Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 253.
- ⁵³*Ibid.*, 268-270.
- ⁵⁴Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 4.
- ⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 276

CHAPTER 3

THE TACTICAL FIGHT IN THREE KEY BATTLEFIELD AREAS: MILITARY REGIONS I, II, AND III

The level of violence, and the level of brutality, in this whole thing right now is on a scale not before achieved in the war in Vietnam.¹

General Creighton W. Abrams, MACV Commander

South Vietnam's Defensive Organization

As the Communists invaded in the spring of 1972, South Vietnam was divided into four sectors. These areas, previously known as “corps tactical zones,” were officially redesignated “MRs” prior to the Easter Offensive. An ARVN corps commander (lieutenant general) was in charge of each region, and his senior US advisor was typically an Army major general, except for MR II whose senior US advisor was civilian John Paul Vann (see figure 2). The corps commanders reported directly to the Joint General Staff (JGS) who in turn, reported to President Thieu. MACV was the senior US advisor to the JGS.

Senior US advisors had two types of teams: province advisory teams and division advisory teams. The province advisory team was responsible for advising the provincial chief on matters of pacification and maintenance of regional and popular forces. South Vietnam was made up of forty-four provinces. The division combat assistance team was led by a US army colonel, assisted by a small staff. Each ARVN division had three regiments, each with its own US advisory team of eight-to-twelve Americans led by a US Army lieutenant colonel. Separate battalions, such as the engineer battalion or cavalry squadron, also had one or two advisors each. US Marines had a similar relationship with

their South Vietnamese marine counterparts, with advisors all the way down to the conventional marine battalion.²

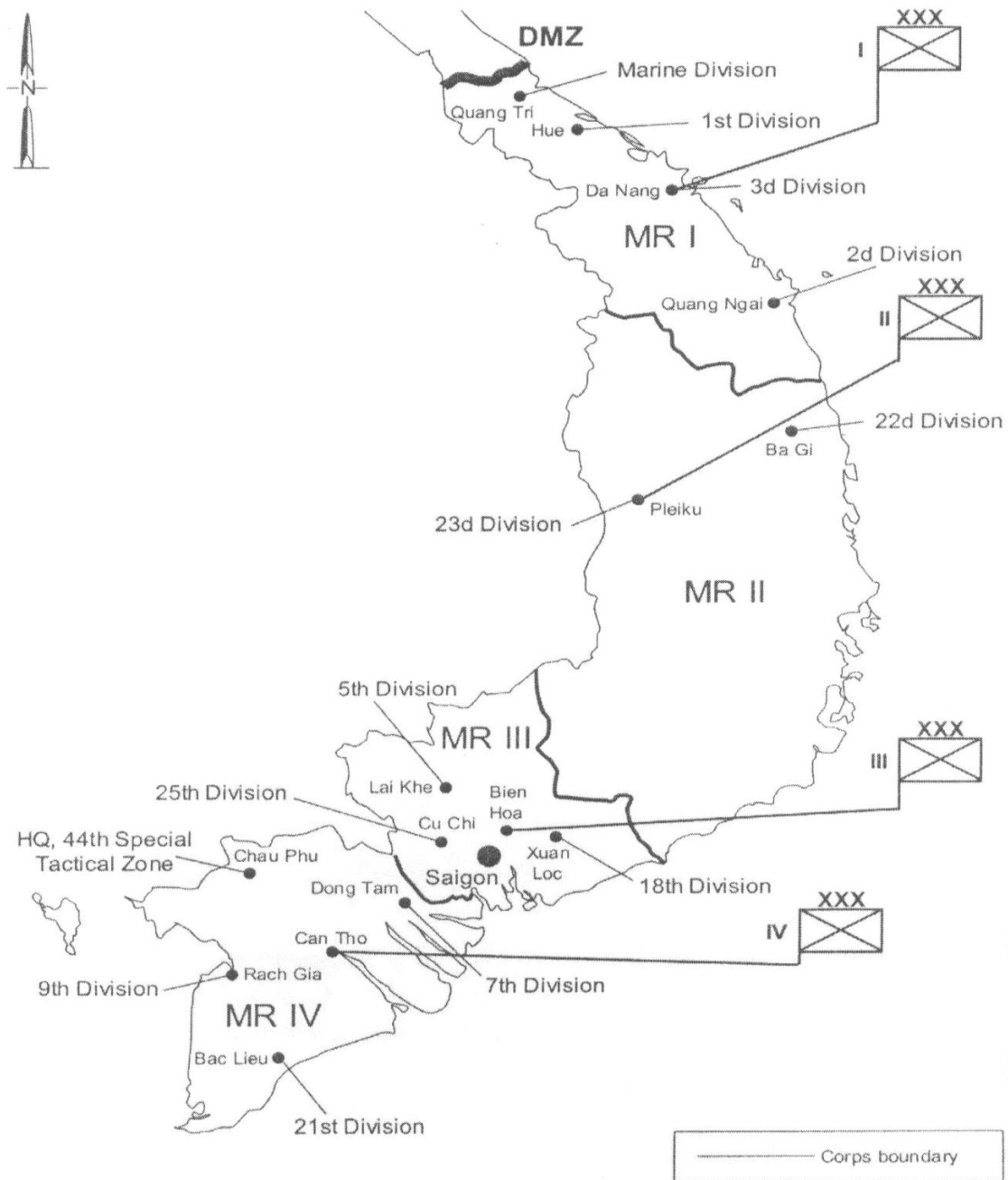


Figure 2. Republic of Vietnam Military Regions and Major South Vietnamese Units Just Prior to the Easter Offensive

Source: James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 2.

The mission of senior US advisors, or regional assistance commanders, was to assist ARVN corps commanders in developing and maintaining an effective military capability. They advised and supported RVNAF military and paramilitary commanders and staffs at all levels of the corps in military operations, training, intelligence, personnel management, and combat support and combat service support activities.³ Lower echelon US advisors had a similar mission, only tailored to the particular advisory level. Thus, the intent in the advisory relationship was that South Vietnamese leaders commanded, while the US advisors simply advised. As previously implied, this relationship was personality dependent. The level of advisor involvement during the Easter Offensive ran the gamut of advisors being virtually shut out of the decision making process in some instances, to assuming defacto command in others.

Finally, one tremendous capability the advisory team had was a vital link to US airpower, which was highly valued by both US and ARVN ground personnel. ALOs or the US Army advisors themselves in the division combat assistance team requested US airpower from the regional DASC either directly or through airborne FACs. The TACC allocated sorties to the DASC. The preponderance of CAS, while authorized by ground commanders, was “cleared hot” by FACs.

This was the defensive structure that the Americans and the South Vietnamese found themselves in as the 1972 NVA invasion began. US advisors were working furiously to train the RVNAF as the American drawdown was nearing completion. The ARVN military now had plenty of forces, a multitude of US advisory assistance, and an abundance of new US equipment now in the hands of the ARVN. However, as Hanoi’s offensive loomed, one big question remained: When locked in the desperate struggle for

survival, would ARVN commanders at each echelon effectively lead their forces to victory, or more to the point, would they stand and fight?

Military Region I--The Battle for Quang Tri and Hue

In 1972, as spring dawned in Vietnam, the ravages of war seemed to be subsiding in MR I. With the 1968 Tet Offensive four years past, life was returning to some semblance of normalcy for the residents of this northern region; major roads and highways were reopening and markets were flourishing.⁴ South Vietnam's two northernmost provinces, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, had been under constant pressure from North Vietnam since the 1956 partition, with leaders in Saigon dubbing the area "the blazing front line."⁵ Thus, the temporary calm, while welcomed by the local populace, was short-lived.

The cities of Quang Tri and Hue were the major objectives of Communist forces in the invasion of MR I (see figure 3). Hue was the capital of Thua Thien Province and the ancient capital of Vietnam, and its temporary capture during Hanoi's 1968 Tet offensive was a major coup for North Vietnam. The bloody fighting in Hue, along with other large battles during Tet, turned the tide of US public opinion against the war. Hanoi's leaders hoped for similar results with their Easter Offensive plunge into MR I, looking to capture the two northern provinces and deliver a decisive psychological blow to the South Vietnamese.



Figure 3. Key Locations and Fire Support Bases in MR I

Source: Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle, Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Topeka, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 37.

On the eve of the Easter Offensive, the Communists had three divisions and eleven independent regiments either poised along the DMZ, some already infiltrated inside MR I. On the defense in the region were the 1st, 2d, and 3d ARVN Infantry Divisions, along with the 51st Regiment, the 1st Ranger Group, and the 1st Armored Brigade. Leading all of these units was I Corps Commander Lieutenant General Lam, a Hue native whose rise to this position was based more on political connections than

military competence. Alternatively, 3d Infantry Division was commanded by Brigadier General Vu Van Giai, one of the best junior generals in the ARVN. However, this newly activated division was inexperienced and poorly trained. This division, which also had operational control of two Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) brigades, was given the task of defending Quang Tri Province. Giai placed his VNMC brigades in the west, defending along the Laotian border and had two of his own regiments, the 56th and 57th, defending the DMZ along a series of firebases. Inexplicably, with intelligence warning of an imminent Communist attack, Giai decided to rotate these two units in order to familiarize them with the entire northern border area. The two regiments were right in the middle of poorly executing this positional shuffle on 30 March when the NVA began their initial heavy artillery barrage signaling the beginning of the Easter Offensive.

The North Vietnamese had carefully planned their attacks against I Corps. They had carefully avoided direct confrontations with the ARVN as they moved men and supplies into final staging areas in preparation for attack. The NVA's plan also included devastating artillery attacks against the 3d Division's FSBs, which was carried out to perfection, neutralizing the ARVN artillery from the outset of the invasion. Additionally, they moved massive amounts of SAMs and AAA into positions to cover their attacks. As it turned out, these air defenses were not needed early in the attacks against the 3d Division, as poor weather conditions with low ceilings predominated. This bad weather concealed the initial attack, and subsequently prevented air support from providing significant aid to the defenders.

The assault on Quang Tri Province included four regiments attacking directly south through the DMZ and four additional regiments attacking from the western Laotian

border region. On the western front, Fire Base Nui Ba Ho was overrun on the evening of 31 March. Firebase Sarge, to the south, was abandoned the next day, and FSB Fuller, another western firebase, also fell. These NVA forces in the west set their sights on Mai Loc Combat Base and Camp Carroll, the two significant remaining impediments between the Communists and Quang Tri City.

As the VNMC were being pushed back in the west, the NVA were having similar success in their drive south through the DMZ. Although Lam was aware of the large enemy troop buildup north of the DMZ, he was caught totally off-guard by the surprise attack from this area. Because they had never attacked through the DMZ previously, Lam just assumed that they would not blatantly violate the 1954 Geneva Accords. The initial targets of the NVA assault across the DMZ were the perimeter firebases in the north. The first priority was firebase A2 sitting astride the main north-south artery in South Vietnam, as the first priority. Shortly after the attacks began, A2 fell to the Communists, and Giai, realizing that defending the remaining northern firebases was untenable, ordered his division to reorganize south of the natural barrier formed by the Cam Lo, Mieu Giang, and Cua Viet Rivers.⁶ ARVN forces withdrew south in a near panic, and by 2 April a new defensive line was established with its northern boundary along the three rivers and its western line wrapping around Camp Carroll, Mai Loc, and FSBs Pedro and Anne (see figure 4).

At this stage, the one decisive point holding the invading forces north of the Cam Lo/Mieu Giang river along Highway 1 was the bridge at Dong Ha. Defending the south side of the bridge were the 2d VNMC Battalion and the 20th Tank Battalion, sporting the new highly sophisticated M48A3 tank. An initial NVA armored assault on the bridge was

halted by VNAF A-1s, ARVN tanks, and a single VNMC marine firing an M-72 Light Anti-tank Weapon that disabled a tank trying to cross the bridge, causing the whole column to turn back. Additionally, a US destroyer off the coast destroyed four NVA PT-76 tanks skirting the riverbank with naval gunfire. In spite of earlier disastrous attempts to defend Quang Tri Province, the VNMC at Dong Ha had come to fight. With the assistance of the ARVN tanks, these marines, commanded by Major Le Ba Binh, were willing to follow their orders to “hold Dong Ha at all costs.” In the words of Binh, “As long as one marine draws a breath of life, Dong Ha will belong to us.”⁷

In spite of their initial success, Lieutenant Colonel Gerald Turley, the acting senior advisor to the 3d ARVN, ordered two US marine advisors to blow the bridge at Dong Ha because he realized the bridge was the decisive point to the whole battle. To continue to try to hold the bridge in the face of the large-scale enemy attack was deemed too risky, for if the enemy succeeded in securing the bridge, the road to Quang Tri would be wide open.⁸ US Marine Major James Smock and Captain John Ripley carried by hand 500 pounds of demolition onto the bridge girders, an excruciating task performed under intense enemy fire. However, the charges initially did not explode. While the advisors were determining what to do next, an air strike hit the bridge, setting off the newly laid ordnance in a huge explosion. The damage to the bridge was severe enough to prevent tanks from crossing. With the Dong Ha bridge blown, the enemy threat from the north temporarily dissipated. However, evidence indicates that the NVA had already given up on its attempts to cross the bridge and were now concentrating their efforts on the western approach.

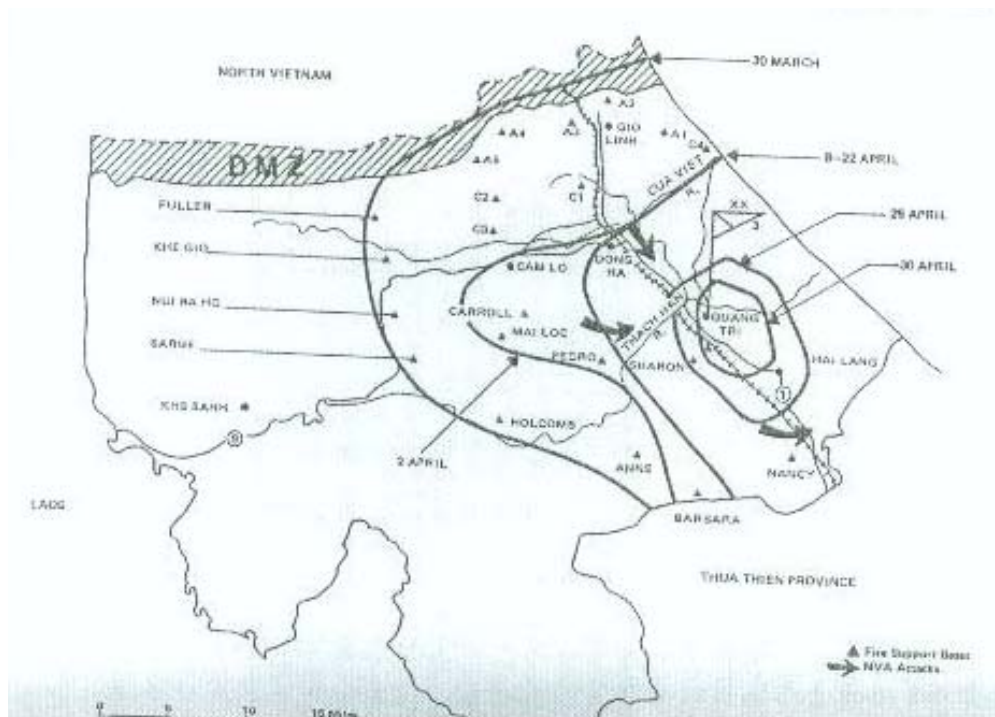


Figure 4. The Timeline of the NVA Assault on Quang Tri
Source: Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle, Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Topeka, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 110.

In the middle of this complex battle, a new wrinkle unfolded. On 2 April, Lieutenant Colonel Iceal Hambleton's EB-66 was shot down just north of the Cam Lo River.⁹ The subsequent twelve-day recovery effort ultimately resulted in Hambleton's successful rescue, but it had tragic unintended consequences for the 3d ARVN. During the rescue, a seventeen-mile radius no-fly zone was placed around Hambleton. This area encompassed virtually the entire 3d Division area of operations, denying airpower to the defenders during their struggle to stop the Communist invaders. The long-range effect of this no-fly zone is debatable, as even with US airpower over this time period, the NVA may ultimately have been successful. For those advisors on the ground, however, the short-term impact was huge. Major David Brookbank, the US ALO to the 3d ARVN,

stated that the exclusion zone gave the North Vietnamese “an opportunity unprecedented in the annals of warfare to advance at will.”¹⁰

As the battlefield drama shifted back to the west, Camp Carroll now became the decisive point in Hanoi’s attempt to take Quang Tri and Hue. Camp Carroll was a stronghold, with twenty-two artillery pieces and numerous heavy machine guns. On Easter Sunday, the 24th NVA Regiment hurled itself at Camp Carroll, but was repulsed by the dug-in defenders from the inexperienced 56th ARVN Regiment. Heavy artillery continued to pound the Camp Carroll defenders. Suddenly, in a move that shocked the US advisors to the regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Dinh, the Regimental Commander, announced that he was surrendering Camp Carroll to the NVA. While it had taken a pounding, Camp Carroll was still defensible with its good defensive terrain, its artillery pieces, and over 1,800 men. Unfortunately, the camp’s leaders failed their soldiers. The 56th Regiment Commander surrendered Camp Carroll that evening, as the two US advisors were evacuated under fire. Many of Camp Carroll’s 1,800 men slipped out of the camp to avoid surrender, with up to 1,000 eventually making it back to friendly lines, including an entire battalion of 300 men who remained a cohesive, organized unit as they evaded toward safety. With Camp Carroll in the hands of the enemy, Mai Loc, just to the south, became undefendable, and was evacuated on the evening of 2 April. Now the only thing that stood in the way of the advancing enemy and Quang Tri City was Firebase Pedro.

Because of General Lam’s reluctance to report bad news back to Saigon, both MACV and the JGS were unaware of the severity of the situation in MR I, initially believing that the attacks were not a major offensive. Thirty-six hours after the attacks

began, an Abrams report to Washington underplayed the seriousness of the onslaught. Colonel Hoang Ngoc Tung, Assistant J-2, JGS in Saigon was later to write, "As it turns out, it was up to three days after the enemy attack was launched in MR-1 before it aroused any major concern in Saigon."¹¹

Following an extremely large artillery barrage on the morning of 9 April, the NVA attacked Firebase Pedro with a combined armor and infantry assault. While initially getting some tanks inside Pedro's compound and wreaking havoc, the stubborn VNMC defenders, with the help of eight ARVN M-48 tanks, naval gunfire, and VNAF A-1 Skyraiders, drove off the attackers, leaving thirteen of the sixteen enemy tanks destroyed. It was the first real victory for the Quang Tri Province defenders, and the NVA assault from the west was temporarily halted.

After the defense of Firebase Pedro, there was a momentary lull in the fighting, which Lam misinterpreted as a sign that the enemy's offensive had stalled and the tide of the battle could be turned with an ARVN counterattack. In reality, the NVA paused only to resupply and prepare for another heavy push to capture Quang Tri City. Although the NVA had lost a lot of infantry and armor thus far in the attacks, it still had three tank battalions infiltrated deep into Quang Tri Province within striking distance of the capital city, and its overwhelming artillery armada was almost entirely intact.

Misreading enemy strength and overestimating the ability of his own forces, on 14 April, Lam ordered the commencement of Quang Trung 729. This counterattack operation was designed to push the battle lines back toward the captured western firebases, and then, if successful, north toward the DMZ. However, instead of leading with his armor, Lam led with his infantry, bogging down the counterattack right from the

start. The line had barely moved a mile in most places and the infantry repeatedly paused while calling for air strikes. US planes were pounding the NVA, particularly B-52 Arc Light strikes. These missions seriously disrupted second echelon forces and the enemy's rear areas, slowing Communist resupply. However, the lack of a strong punch from ARVN maneuver forces failed to take advantage of this air support and Quang Trung 719 "settled into a costly battle of attrition in place" where "ARVN battalions were steadily reduced in strength and effectiveness by the enemy's deadly artillery fire," according to one observer.¹² The offensive was dead.

On the morning of 27 April, a division-sized NVA force, supported by heavy artillery, began the final squeeze of Quang Tri City. In the face of the relentless Communist onslaught, the 3d Division's line began to crack. Units fell back, were overrun, or simply fled in panic. Soon the defenders retreated to a line surrounding Ai Tu combat base. Highway 1 became a major evacuation route for both fleeing soldiers and civilians. By 29 April, the NVA had units within 4,000 yards of the capital. In contrast, 3d Division Headquarters was unsure of the location of most of its units. At dusk on 30 April, the invaders from the north controlled all of Quang Tri Province north of the Capital. The 3d Division collapse was nearly complete as the defenders retreated to the ancient Citadel near the center of Quang Tri City.

As the noose tightened, the 3d Division staff and 80 US advisors and other personnel were evacuated out of the Citadel by four USAF H-3 helicopters, leaving Quang Tri City under enemy control. As ALO Brookbank perhaps best summed up this final day:

The city became cut off and isolated. The intense NVA heavy artillery and tanks created maximum havoc by splitting some ARVN forces and inducing panic in others. NGF (naval gunfire) and US TAC Air were more effectively used while ARVN artillery gradually lost all value. Many ARVN forces held while others broke and ran. The ARVN Marines never lost fighting effectiveness and had to be ordered to withdraw many times to plug gaps in the line. In the end, the 147th Marine Brigade, 258th Marine Brigade, and the 20th Tank Squadron, because they never stopped fighting and remained effective, enabled the US advisors, cut off at the Citadel, to evacuate.¹³

After the fall of Quang Tri City, virtually all remaining South Vietnamese forces in Quang Tri Province were withdrawing toward Thua Thien Province to the south, sharing roadways with panicked and fleeing South Vietnamese civilians. Of the retreating I Corps units, only the VNMC forces continued fighting as competent and cohesive units as they retrograded to the south. They heroically held the O-Khe river bridge for an extra day under fire, allowing an additional 10,000 soldiers and civilians to cross safely into Thua Thien Province.¹⁴ Once all forces were safely across, the O-Khe and My Chanh bridges were blown, and a new defensive line was set up along the large river bordering the two provinces, ceding all of Quang Tri Province to the Communists just thirty-five days after the offensive had begun. This would prove to be the high water mark for the invasion force in the north as several bloody attempts to cross the river were beaten back by South Vietnamese forces that were now reorganizing and preparing for their eventual counterattack.

South Vietnam's 1st Division defense of the Thua Thien Province, containing the strategically important ancient capital of Hue was much more effective. Approximately three weeks prior to the start of the Easter Offensive, 1st Division launched Operation Lam Son 45, a two-regiment assault into the A Shau Valley, a long-time enemy sanctuary used for the buildup of forces preparing to attack into the province toward Hue. This

fierce ARVN raid, while not defeating the communists outright, did upset their rhythm and timetable for the coming attack.

The North Vietnamese never gained the initiative in their attacks out of Laos through the A Shau Valley, and they ended up in bloody fights of attrition with the ARVN. The slow NVA advance surrounded Firebases Bastogne and Checkmate, but were delayed by US airpower, which finally was benefiting from improving weather conditions in late April. The two firebases eventually fell, but not until the end of April. In the first week of May, the ARVN defensive line in MR I was positioned along the My Chanh River between its two northernmost provinces and just west of Bastogne and Checkmate. To hold this line and save Hue, I Corps needed a big shakeup, which it got right at the top.

President Thieu, heeding advice from Abrams, relieved Lam and replaced him with Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, a highly competent leader who was effective immediately upon taking command. He calmed the chaotic situation in Hue created by many of 3d Divisions looting and pillaging soldiers by implementing a shoot-to-kill policy against looters and arsonists. Additionally, he assigned the marines their own division area of operations, vastly improved fire support coordination, and developed a defense-in-depth strategy along an inverted L-shaped line around Hue. According to MR I senior advisor Major General Fred Kroesen, “General Truong has got that staff working, and there’s a sense of urgency in the staff that’s *never* been there before.”¹⁵ Truong’s leadership rapidly stabilized the front, allowing counterattacks to begin by mid-May.

By 20 May, the ARVN had recaptured Firebases Bastogne and Checkmate as their slow drive to expand their lines gained momentum. Weather continued to clear, and now, nearly two months into the invasion, the newly deployed American air armada was in theater. Airpower, led by relentless B-52 strikes, became much more devastating against the NVA, seriously affecting their resupply, reinforcement, and morale. These large bombers were very destructive with bombing runs perilously close to friendly forces as they worked their slow progression to the north and west. Very slow, but steady attrition warfare, along with the strengthening of I Corps forces tipped the combat ratio favorably towards the South Vietnamese during June.

On 28 June, Lam Son 72, the first corps-sized counteroffensive ever executed by the South Vietnamese military, was launched with the objective of recapturing Quang Tri City. This ambitious attack, with pulverizing air strikes leading the way, pushed back the NVA back into Quang Tri City where they prepared for a last stand. For the rest of July and August, the battle for the province capital turned into siege warfare around the old Citadel fort in the city-center. The NVA were dug in deeply and repeated attempts to take the Citadel were repulsed by defenders willing to fight to the last man. NVA artillery constantly rained down on the attackers but were met with even more devastating fires from ARVN artillery, naval gunfire, and thousands of air strikes.

Finally, the VNMC replaced ARVN forces as the primary assault force, and after three more punishing weeks finally captured the Citadel. Quang Tri City was now back in South Vietnamese hands, marking the official end of the Easter Offensive, although the NVA were still occupying areas of South Vietnam, plenty of fighting between the two sides still lay ahead. Of the three contested MRs, the NVA had made the most significant

gains in MR I, but their early successes turned to bitter failures. Both, they and the South Vietnamese, suffered thousands of casualties, and both would see similar harsh fighting in MR II and III.

Military Region II--Saving Kontum

MR II, which contained the tri-border area between Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam had long been a logistical jumping off point from the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam. The area had been the target of persistent air interdiction efforts aided by special forces surveillance teams from the Studies and Observation Group. These attacks were often successful, but only temporarily slowed the flow of men and supplies down the trail due to its flexible nature.

Beginning in mid-January 1972, heavy B-52 raids began striking the triple canopy jungles of the tri-border region where intelligence reports indicated some 30,000 to 50,000 NVA troops were concentrating.¹⁶ In spite of these bombing efforts, the NVA was still able to conceal most of its corps-sized force staging for attack into MR II. The goal of this force was to take Kontum City and the entire province and use it as a staging point for future operations. Communist forces attacking into the Kontum area of MR II included two infantry divisions, two tank battalions, and thirteen artillery battalions, along with a variety of rockets, mortars, and AAA.¹⁷ An estimated 400 enemy tanks were in place at the start of the offensive, including the modern Soviet T-54.¹⁸

Directly to the east of Kontum Province was Binh Dinh, MR II's northern most coastal province. Its northern hamlets were already dominated by the VC even prior to the Easter Offensive, allowing the NVA to focus their attention on the remaining South Vietnamese bases in these areas.¹⁹ They had good success and consolidated gains in

northern Binh Dinh, but remaining ARVN troops in the southern part of the province were enough to deter the Communists from pressing hard into the south. They consolidated their gains, eventually cutting Highway 19, a vital link between the cities of Qui Nhon and Pleiku, before turning their attention to Kontum Province. The NVA hoped to successfully cut South Vietnam in half across Kontum Province and northern Binh Dinh.

Facing this threat, II Corps' defending forces were led by a timid ARVN Lieutenant General Ngo Dzu, who would become dependent on the advice of his US advisor, John Paul Vann. Vann's bold, competent, and commanding style more than made up for his weak counterpart. Vann's plan for defending Kontum Province, and its capital was to hold the enemy to the north with 10,000 troops in the city of Tan Canh. Kontum itself would be defended only by an airborne brigade and an airborne division headquarters. Vann's strategy was to use ground defenders as a fixing force, while airpower, led by B-52s, would be his decisive killing force.²⁰

Heavy artillery attacks on 30 March kicked off the Easter Offensive in Kontum Province, followed by more attacks-by-fire in the following days. Probing attacks continued for the next several days, primarily in the Rocket Ridge area, just west of Highway 14, the major north-south artery in the province. This north-south running ridgeline was key terrain from which the communists, who controlled much of it, could attack northwest into Tan Canh or southwest into Kontum City. With a positional advantage, the NVA advance was slowed only by massive US air attacks.²¹

Heavy attacks against FSB Charlie along Highway 14 one-half the way between Kontum City and Dak To began on 11 April. Although the NVA were initially repelled

by punishing tactical airpower, Charlie was abandoned on 15 April by ARVN forces who had not been supplied in four days. According to one after-action report, “One of the enemy’s objectives seemed to center on the interdiction of major road arteries from the coast to the Central Highlands, and between Pleiku and Kontum cities, to deny the use of these routes for ARVN’s resupply, replacement, and redeployment.”²² The NVA plan was working. The ARVN in the Kontum Province began to experience major supply problems, restricting the use of artillery ammunition and causing a drastic reduction of rice reserves by 19 April.²³

Beginning 17 April, and over the next week, heavy NVA attacks rocked the 22d ARVN Division at Tan Canh (Dak To area). With armor leading the way, the NVA assault quickly strained the overwhelmed and underperforming ARVN defenses, and on 24 April, Tan Canh village was overrun. Soon Dak To II, directly to the west of Tan Canh, also fell. It was a weak defensive effort on the part of the ARVN. The surprising appearance of large quantities of tanks appeared to unravel them, with one senior US advisor stating, “the reason they broke and ran initially was the surprise of the tanks. They had never fought tanks before. They had plenty of anti-tank devices, but no one could visualize a bunch of T-54s.”²⁴

With the quick fall of Tan Canh and Dak To, and the ARVN in full retreat, nothing lay between the NVA and lightly-defended Kontum, just twenty-five miles to the south. For reasons still unclear, the Communists failed to exploit this opportunity. Additionally, the ARVN abandoned its final two firebases on Rocket Ridge, ceding the entire piece of key terrain to the NVA. The NVA now began resupply and prepared to attack south into Kontum City.

Defending Kontum was the 23d ARVN Division, which had operational control of a ranger group and the remnants of an airborne brigade. The division used part of their force to form a defensive ring around the city approximately four miles from the center. North of this ring, along Highway 14, was a blocking force. The Division Commander, Colonel Ly Tong Ba, also had control of four ranger battalions on the south side of Rocket Ridge blocking NVA approaches from the west. Kontum was located in a valley surrounded by high terrain, which seemed to give the advantage to the attacking NVA. However, whenever the enemy massed along that terrain preparing to attack, they became extremely vulnerable to US airpower, particularly from B-52s.

American airpower attacks on the advancing enemy provided an extra week of vital preparation time for the 23rd ARVN Division, preventing the fall of Kontum City. On 28 April, a vital bridge on Route 14 was destroyed by tactical airpower, delaying armor moving south toward the city, and the Arc Light missions continued to rain down on the advancing Communists who reported back to rear area commanders that, “bombs continue to fall on us and we cannot attack.”²⁵ In addition, Republic of Korea forces and ARVN troops reopened a vital mountain pass, allowing vital supplies to flow along Highway 19 into the highlands from the east coast.

As the situation around Kontum City remained static for the first three days of May, the ARVN abandoned FSB Lima and Landing Zone English. These retreating forces left behind numerous trucks, tanks, artillery pieces, and other equipment which had to be destroyed by US air strikes to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.²⁶ This waste of US airpower was repeated often throughout South Vietnam during this period, and was a source of frustration for USAF pilots.

Attacks continued to intensify over the next week. By 8 May, the ranger unit defending along the southern edge of Rocket Ridge was surrounded and Polei Kleng, a base just to the west of Kontum City had to be evacuated. By this time President Thieu had seen enough. He was completely dissatisfied with Dzu's leadership of II Corps, and at the urging of Abrams, replaced him with Major General Nguyen Van Toan. The NVA kept pressing in what appeared to be annihilation warfare, a win-at-all costs strategy, as US air strikes continued to pummel their slowly advancing force. Now Toan took control and prepared to stop the enemy advance. On 14 May, a battalion-sized assault led by tanks slammed into the Kontum defenders, and the epic battle for this provincial capital had officially begun.

After ten years in Vietnam, John Paul Vann was a huge believer in America's airpower advantage over North Vietnam, particularly with US ground forces removed from the scene. The battle for Kontum was his chance to exploit that advantage, and he did not waste it. He personally developed the B-52 strike plan around Kontum to facilitate Arc Light attacks against enemy rear staging areas, which were particularly devastating. In his after-action analysis of the offensive, Truong described one particular attack on 14 May at Kontum. Two well-placed B-52 strikes hit NVA troops massing for an assault. The strikes "came exactly on time. The explosions rocked the small city. As the roar subsided, a dreadful silence fell over the scene. At dawn, ARVN search elements discovered several hundred enemy bodies with their weapons scattered all around. Kontum was saved."²⁷

Enemy artillery continued to pound Kontum City, but ARVN air strikes responded with equal ferocity. With provisions running low, USAF C-130s became the

primary source for desperately needed supplies. However, landing at Kontum Airfield was extremely dangerous, with several transport aircraft damaged or destroyed by missiles and AAA. To counter these enemy air defenses, C-130 crews soon began night-only landings. They also took advantage of new equipment and tactics and began precision high-altitude airdrops, successfully resupplying ground forces while staying above most of the threats.

Communist forces continued to squeeze the city with probing ground attacks and continuous artillery barrages. ARVN defenders continued to hold off the attackers with punishing air strikes. In an effort to better coordinate and deconflict air support to the besieged ARVN, VNAF tactical air was directed to support the city itself, while US tactical air focused on the Rockpile. B-52s continued raids in the pre-planned strike boxes around the city. This new arrangement simplified the process of getting the wide variety of air support in the relatively small area and made it nearly impossible for the NVA to properly mass for ground attacks on the city.

A serious attempt to gain a foothold into the city was launched on 18 May, but was driven back by determined ARVN troops using claymores, artillery at close range, and B-52s. More heavy probing attacks took place, but were also repelled. The enemy was knocked off-stride by the air strikes and by their continued inability to launch a properly coordinated attack with their artillery, armor, and infantry.

Once again, the NVA launched a desperate assault on 21 May, with a company closing with and driving back ARVN defenders, creating a small wedge in their lines. B-52s once again disrupted NVA attempts to reinforce their gains and Army Cobra gunships hammered the enemy forces remaining in the salient that the attacks had

formed.²⁸ The NVA launched a few more attacks into the city, making minor gains in some places, but could not parlay these small successes into anything significant. Violent NVA attacks persisted for another week but were once again driven back by determined defenders, Cobra gunships and more doses of deadly airpower.

Finally, on 30 May, with the NVA attack culminated, the 23d ARVN Division counterattacked in fierce fighting, much of it hand-to-hand, as they finally cleared the remaining enemy forces out of their footholds in the city. While airpower had saved the city by repeatedly breaking up enemy attacks, it had been unable to drive the defenders out of their bunkers. It took ARVN ground forces to do that. On 30 May, President Thieu flew in to congratulate Colonel Ba on his victory, and the next day Vann declared the battle for Kontum officially over.²⁹ John Paul Vann, the charismatic and courageous leader who was in large part responsible for saving Kontum and turning back the North Vietnamese in MR II, was killed in a helicopter crash on 9 June while flying back to Kontum from Pleiku. It was a tragic loss for both MACV and South Vietnamese defenders alike in MR II. Vann's heroic efforts would not soon be forgotten.

After Kontum, the focus of the battle shifted back to eastern Binh Dinh Province, where the North Vietnamese were gradually driven out of the cities and bases that they had previously captured. When the three northern district capitals in Binh Dinh were recaptured in late July, it signaled the end of the Easter Offensive in MR II. However, Communist forces remained in the more rugged countryside of this region and were still capable of mounting regimental attacks.

Military Region III--The Siege at An Loc

The southern assaults into MR III were somewhat unexpected, as the main attacks were predicted to occur in the first two regions to the north. Once launched, however, attacks into Binh Long Province were arguably the biggest threat to South Vietnam of the entire offensive due to the proximity of the advancing NVA from Saigon, just sixty-five miles south of An Loc. Clearly, President Thieu could not allow North Vietnam to take and hold An Loc. Even if they stopped there, as planned, and did not immediately proceed toward Saigon, they could use An Loc as a new staging area for any future final assault on South Vietnam's capital.

MR III was comprised of 11 provinces that surrounded Saigon, many of which had seen much fighting earlier in the war. Leading the effort defending the region was III Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Minh, along with his senior US advisor, Major General James Hollingsworth. At Minh's disposal were the 5th, 18th, and the 25th ARVN Divisions. Defending Binh Long Province was the 5th ARVN division, led by Brigadier General Le Van Hung, along with provincial forces numbering around 2,000 soldiers led by Colonel Tran Van Nhut. Hung's senior American advisor was Colonel William Miller, who had a rocky relationship with the division commander.

Binh Long Province was the middle of MR III's three western-most provinces that bordered Cambodia (see figure 5). It was rectangular shape with the long sides running north and south. Highway 13 cut the province right down the middle, running straight south out of Cambodia and eventually into Saigon. The town of Loc Ninh lay about one-third the way down Highway 13 between An Loc and the Cambodian border, with the An Loc almost exactly in the center of the province. An Loc, a town of about

20,000 people, was surrounded by rubber plantations and sat astride Highway 13. It was eleven blocks long and six blocks wide, with houses of brick, stone, stucco, and wood.³⁰ This small, unassuming town would become the site of the longest siege of the war, its stubborn defenders suffering arguably the longest sustained period of continuous, punishing artillery attacks in the annals of warfare. Put simply: renowned Vietnam scholar Douglas Pike called it “probably the single most important battle in the war.”³¹

Leading the invading Communist forces was NVA Lieutenant General Tan Van Tra, who had thirty-three battalions at disposal for attack. Prior to the start of the offensive, Hung and Miller anticipated the attacks, but thought the main effort would be in Tay Ninh Province directly to the west of Binh Long because this was the traditional enemy attack avenue toward Saigon. As the offensive began, this belief was further reinforced by an NVA two-regiment diversionary attack into Tay Ninh, while the actual main effort was the 9th VC Division pushing south toward An Loc. The diversionary attacks were initially very successful. However, since the NVA did not exploit their success, Hollingsworth, who was initially fooled, now correctly guessed that Binh Long was the real enemy avenue-of-approach. As was the case with the other two regions, there was no shortage of NVA artillery supporting the attack in MR III. Among the Communist arsenal were 122-millimeter howitzers, 107- and 122-millimeter rockets, 82- and 120-millimeter mortars, along with captured 105- and 155-millimeter guns.³²

On 5 April, with MACV and the JGS focused on MR I, where they were just becoming aware of how poorly things were going, the enemy in MR III began to reveal their true intentions with heavy artillery barrages against ARVN forces in Binh Long Province. The northern Binh Long Province town of Loc Ninh was the first enemy

objective as they pushed out of the Cambodian border region. The city was defended by the poorly led 9th ARVN Regiment, whose commanding officer, Colonel Nguyen Cong Vinh, was not up to the demands required for this task. Before long, one of the US advisors, Captain Mark Smith, took defacto command, doing his best to lead this weak regiment against fierce NVA opposition. In fact, with the shock and surprise of the ferocious attacks of 5 April, combined with Vinh's defeatist attitude that the situation was hopeless, Loc Ninh almost fell that first day. Smith, who spoke fluent Vietnamese, was seemingly everywhere, coordinating ground defenses and tactical air support.

Hollingsworth said in his report to MACV, "There can be no question that Loc Ninh would have fallen in the hands of the enemy that first day if it had not been for the support of the 7th AF [air force] and the brilliant fire direction of a young army captain."³³ Naval air from the USS *Constellation*, VNAF F-5s, A-37s, USAF F-4s and AC-130s responded were key to Loc Ninh's initial defense.³⁴ This temporary reprieve was short-lived. The NVA were defeating dispersed ARVN units in the countryside around Loc Ninh, while continuing to press attacks against the town itself. The ARVN defenders were barely hanging on.

On the morning of 7 April, the NVA launched a major ground attack from the west and north, and just two hours later, ARVN defenses totally collapsed. With the situation spiraling out of control, and the defensive compound overrun, a wounded Smith radioed to aircraft overhead, "They're on top of us. Drop your stuff on us. They're in the bunker and we want to get rid of them. Tear the damn thing down!"³⁵ By nightfall on 8 April, all radio contact was lost with defenders in Loc Ninh as it fell into enemy hands. All US advisors except one in the town were either killed, or eventually captured. Captain

Smith, wounded several times, initially evaded but was finally captured. He survived his wounds and was eventually released with the rest of the American POWs in January, 1973.

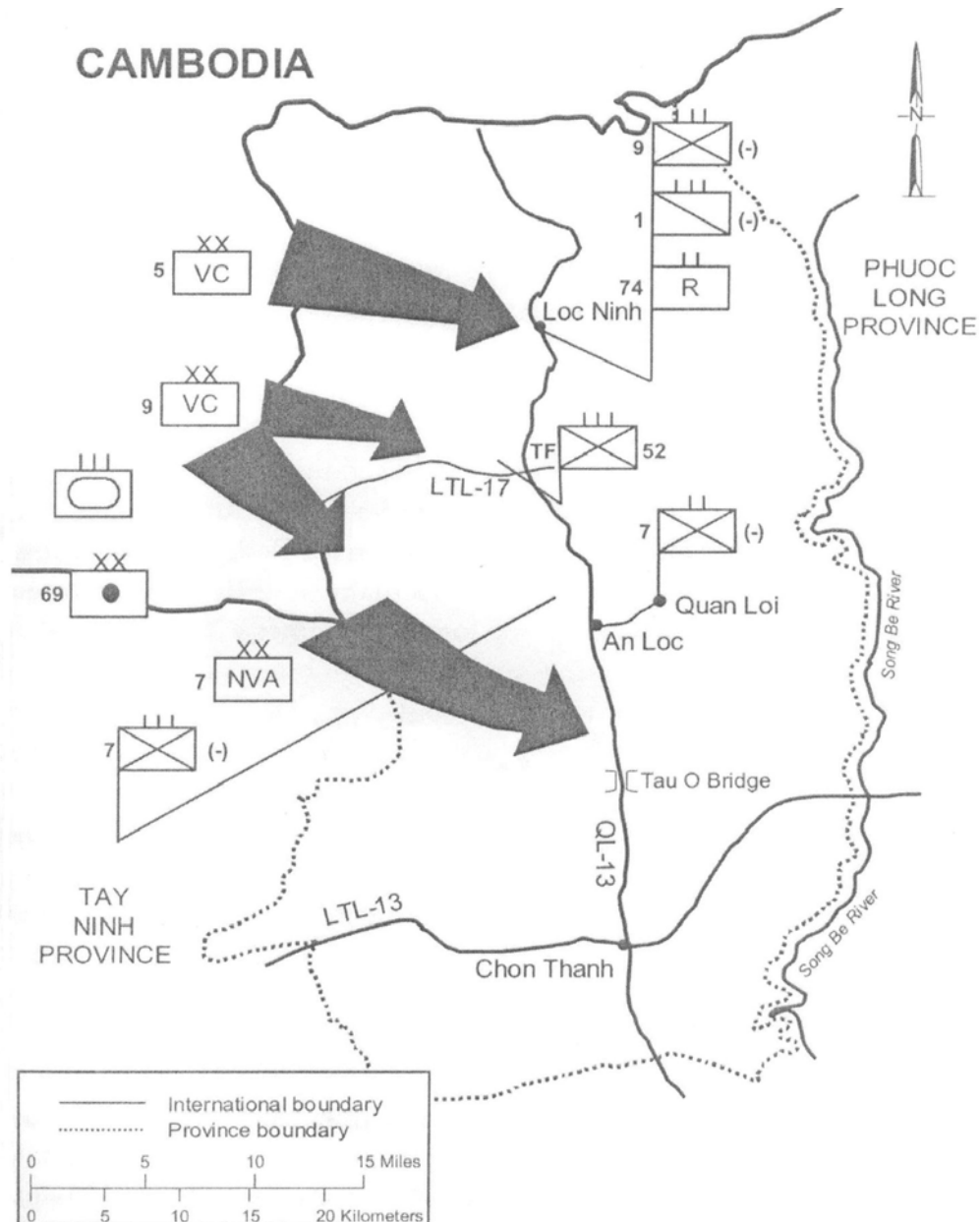


Figure 5. NVA Attack Plan in Binh Long Province

Source: James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 35.

With Loc Ninh falling, Miller finally convinced Hung to withdraw Task Force (TF) 52, a brigade-sized Task Force defending two firebases west of Highway 13 between Loc Ninh and An Loc, back into the southern city. Unfortunately, the order was easier given than carried out. After an unsuccessful breakout attempt with their vehicles and equipment, Hung ordered the task force to destroy their equipment and get to An Loc any way they could. TF 52 withdrew to the south, fighting several running battles along the way. Eventually, 600 of the original 1,000 men of TF 52 made their way to An Loc to join in the defense.³⁶ The stage was set; the siege of the city was soon to begin.

With the northern part of Binh Long Province in the hands of the enemy, General Hung was demoralized and despondent. Thankfully for the An Loc defenders, Colonel Tran Van Nhut, the Province Chief, arrived in An Loc. In stark contrast to Hung, Nhut was a very strong leader who played a major role to the successful defense of this crucial town. The gravity of the situation facing South Vietnam in MR III was now becoming very apparent to III Corps Commander Minh and his senior advisor Hollingsworth. Both leaders informed superiors in Saigon of the losses in northern Binh Long Province, along with the tenuous nature of the situation. An Loc was now the center-of-gravity upon which the fate of not only the province rested, but arguably the success or failure of the entire offensive, perhaps even the entire war. Recognizing this, President Thieu told senior officers in An Loc that the “city was to be defended to the death,” with General Hollingsworth passing the same message to the US advisors. Colonel Miller called An Loc President Thieu’s “Bastogne.”³⁷

On 7 April, Quan Loi airstrip on the outskirts of the city was captured by the NVA, providing them with key high ground from which to direct artillery into the town.

Probing attacks hit the town over the next several days. ARVN defenders from the surrounding area were filtering into town during this time. The 8th Regiment was brought in by helicopter on the 10th and 11th of April, and 1,000 soldiers from the 7th Regiment completed their withdrawal from the countryside into town the next day. By 12 April, 3,000 defenders were squeezed into the town of 15,000. These ARVN forces would eventually be surrounded by three NVA divisions. The defensive strategy was boiled down to simple terms by Hollingsworth, who said, “Hold them and I’ll kill them with airpower.”³⁸

On 12 April, a massive artillery barrage began, with more than 1,000 rounds falling on the city.³⁹ This was followed by even more intense NVA attacks-by-fire beginning in the early morning hours of the 13th, with more than 7,000 shells and rockets hitting the city over a 15-hour period.⁴⁰ This barrage signaled a large-scale impending attack that Hollingsworth correctly predicted would occur that morning, leading him to request, and receive, additional B-52 Arc Light support from Abrams. The massive NVA ground assault began with combined infantry and armor attacks from the west and the north. The NVA tanks initially shocked the defenders, making solid gains into An Loc, particularly from the north. However, ARVN defenders got a huge morale boost when they realized how effective the M-72 light antitank weapons were, as single soldiers began knocking out the tanks. Additionally, the B-52s strikes and tactical air decimated NVA infantry as they were assembling for attack while attack helicopters hit NVA tanks inside the city. This disruption, combined with poor infantry-armor assault training, led many tanks to run through the city unprotected by supporting infantry, contributing to the success of the light antitank weapons. In spite of their lack of coordination between NVA

infantry and armor, the ferocity and scope of their ground assault, combined with their tremendous supporting artillery, almost led to the fall of An Loc on 13 April. Fortunately for the ARVN, An Loc held that day, and withstood two more days of ferocious assaults by the NVA.

Massive amounts of airpower were sent to support An Loc's defenders. B-52s continued to strike NVA assembly and other rear areas. US A-6s, A-7s, F-4s, A-37s and VNAF A-1s struck the massed NVA on the outskirts of the city, while fixed-wing gunships and Cobra helicopters worked the close-in targets. Tactical airpower was used primarily during the day and gunships were the primary night platform. While the airborne FAC's and the US Army advisors were initially unfamiliar with employing the fixed-wing gunships in a CAS role, they quickly learned the tremendous advantages of having the long-loitering, devastatingly accurate firepower constantly available. At least one gunship remained over the city "at all times" during the siege.⁴¹

By nightfall on the 16th, three days of intense fighting resulted in the NVA holding the northern part of the city, while the ARVN held the southern half of the city. The city had barely survived the terrible onslaught, with devastating CAS provided by a bevy of aircraft thrown into the fray. At this point, Miller was pessimistic, reporting to Hollingsworth, "The Division CG is tired--unstable--irrational--irritable--inadvisable-and unapproachable. When the chips are down he loses [*sic*] all of his composure. Unless Airborne saves us I believe the enemy can take An Loc any time."⁴² The "Airborne" that Miller was referring to was the 1st Airborne Brigade which was attempting to fight its way up Highway 13 to reopen this vital supply line of communication and reinforce An Loc's defenders. They were subsequently moved to high ground east of An Loc and

replaced by the 21st ARVN. Unfortunately, these forces ran into an entrenched blocking force made up of a regiment from the 7th NVA Division and could not proceed any closer than nine miles south of An Loc, leaving the city's defenders surrounded by the NVA for weeks to follow.

Between 16 and 19 April, there was a temporary lull in the NVA ground assaults on the city, but artillery continued to rain down on An Loc's defenders. On 19 April, another massive artillery barrage preceded another phase of determined ground attacks against An Loc. Like the earlier attacks, desperate fighting raged between attacker and defender for three more days. All remaining ARVN artillery in the area was destroyed, with mortars the only organic fire support remaining to the defenders. Airpower and attack aviation once again beat back attack after attack by the NVA. Several times during this second three-day battle, An Loc was on the brink of falling, but when cornered into a "stand-or-die" position against desperate NVA attacks, the city's defenders stood and held.⁴³ This second all-out attempt to take the city by force was turned back by 22 April.

From 22 April to 10 May, the assault on An Loc resembled a more traditional siege-warfare state, with artillery raining down on the city day after day, while the tactical situation on the ground remained virtually unchanged. On one hand, this two and one-half week period of attack by fire was tactically advantageous to the Communists. The surrounded ARVN forces and their advisors were forced underground by the punishing artillery strikes. Additionally, aerial resupply to the cutoff defenders was extremely dangerous due to the heavy enemy air defense threat around An Loc, leaving defenders and civilians in the city running short on food and other supplies. Five C-130s were shot down during the campaign attempting to airlift supplies into An Loc, killing

seventeen crewmembers. Resupply was so difficult, most of the airdropped supplies landed in the hands of the enemy, adding insult to injury for the beleaguered ARVN defenders. Finally, high velocity chutes and the same high-altitude techniques that were described in the battle for Kontum were developed, bringing the accuracy of the airdrops up to 90 percent from 8 May through the end of June.⁴⁴

Despite the tactical disadvantages the An Loc defenders were under, their tenacious defense allowed US airpower to become a huge advantage for their defense. It was during this period that the US air armada in theater literally doubled, greatly enhancing the already punishing effects of CAS and interdiction against the invading NVA. It was now a matter of who would break first. Would it be the defenders, who were being assaulted with overwhelming daily artillery attacks, or the attackers, who were taking a daily beating by US air strikes?

At this point in the battle the 15,000 to 20,000 civilians living in An Loc were unavoidably caught in the crossfire. Dead soldiers and civilian bodies littered the streets. Rats ran rampant. The provincial hospital, in spite its clear markings, was hit by NVA shells, killing most of the staff and its 300 patients. Bad wounds became a death sentence.⁴⁵

By 10 May, the North Vietnamese surrounded the city with more than 10,000 troops and prepared to launch a two-division all-out assault on An Loc. The city's 4,000 defenders braced for the attack, while US advisors were unsure that they could hold off another attack. Hollingsworth requested and received twenty-five B-52 strike boxes for a twenty-four-hour period starting on 11 May, the day of the predicted assault. There would be a B-52 Arc Light strike every fifty-five minutes over that period. He also was

allocated 200 tactical air sorties. As predicted, the NVA launched their attack the morning of 11 May following a massive preparatory artillery barrage. Braving ferocious air assaults, the NVA pushed two salients into the An Loc perimeter, but on the verge of victory, they seized the wrong building, the provincial public works building, which was “an objective of no tactical value.”⁴⁶ With their initiative lost, and suffering under the continuous pounding from the air, they could not further exploit their initial gains. The B-52 strikes were particularly devastating, completely disrupting NVA follow-on exploitation forces, defeating repeated attempts to take the city over the next few days. These attempts were also plagued by continued poor coordination between infantry and armor. By evening of 15 May, the NVA called off its ground attacks and retreated into the rubber plantations around the city. The city was saved, but was still cut off and vulnerable to daily attacks-by-fire.

Unable to take the town by force, the NVA shifted to a “starve them out” strategy, shifting forces south to keep the 21st Division from breaking through Highway 13 and reaching An Loc’s defenders. While NVA forces and the 21st ARVN were locked in this vicious struggle along the highway, an ARVN task force was fighting their way into the An Loc area from firebase Tan Khai from the southeast. Finally, on 8 June, this task force linked up with defenders on the southern edge of town, marking the beginning of the end of the siege. Defenders began pushing out their perimeter and by 12 June, the entire city was under ARVN control. On the 18th, General Minh officially declared the siege over, and although there was still plenty of fighting to be done before the end of the Easter Offensive in the province, North Vietnam’s efforts in this region were soundly defeated. Tragically, after the siege was all but broken, an NVA artillery shell landed amongst a

delegation of visiting US officers from Training and Advisory Command, wounding two and killing three instantly, with a fourth, Brigadier General Richard Tallman, dying later enroute to a medical facility.

While the ARVN forces in MR III suffered big losses in this desperate battle, the NVA's losses were far more devastating. Hollingsworth declared after the battle, "I would think the enemy is aware of their disaster. Two and two-thirds divisions [of enemy troops] is one helluva rent to pay for twenty-five percent of a small inconsequential province capital for less than 30 days occupancy."⁴⁷ This blow, along with losses in the other two regions, would set back the Communists timetable for unifying Vietnam by almost three years.

The After-Action Tactical Summary

Despite their victory over the North Vietnamese in the Easter Offensive, it is clear that the forces of South Vietnam had a long way to go to be tactically proficient enough to match their northern counterparts in any large-scale future battle without American assistance. Thieu undoubtedly realized this, which explains his reluctance to agree to the final conditions of the final 1973 peace agreement. Even after being coerced by Nixon to accept the deal, he knew that if the Communists broke the agreement with a large-scale attack, Saigon would need America to keep its promise to intervene or its survival would certainly be in jeopardy. In the end, he was right.

The ARVN had enough manpower and equipment to defend themselves, but all too often, they lacked the leadership to succeed in battle. Many times during the offensive, the ARVN appeared content to sit back in their defensive postures and let US airpower save the day. Ultimately, this strategy worked during the Easter Offensive.

However, with the Americans withdrawing, and with US involvement future large-scale Vietnam battles uncertain, this over reliance on American airpower did not prepare ARVN forces to fight on their own. This would prove disastrous during South Vietnam's 1975 collapse.

¹Sorley, 331.

²Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 33-35.

³Ibid., 33.

⁴Turley, 19.

⁵Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 15.

⁶Ibid., 59.

⁷Ibid., 64.

⁸Turley, 143-48.

⁹Doglione et al., 133-141.

¹⁰Ibid., 202.

¹¹Ibid., 87.

¹²Truong, 37.

¹³Turley, 285.

¹⁴Turley, 301.

¹⁵Sorley, 332.

¹⁶Peter A. W. Liebchen, *Kontum: Battle for the Central Highlands, 30 March-10 June 1972* (Honolulu, HI: Project CHECO, 7th AF, CHECO/CORONA Harvest Division Operations Analysis Office, HQ PACAF, 1972), 2.

¹⁷Ibid., 5.

¹⁸Ibid., 3.

- ¹⁹Andrade, 224.
- ²⁰Ibid., 253-63.
- ²¹Liebchen, 12.
- ²²Ibid., 13,14.
- ²³Ibid., 15.
- ²⁴Ibid., 24.
- ²⁵Ibid., 34.
- ²⁶Ibid., 34, 35.
- ²⁷Truong, 98.
- ²⁸Andrade, 295, 296.
- ²⁹Ibid., 317-19.
- ³⁰Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 26, 27.
- ³¹Sorley, 327, 328.
- ³²Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 35, 36.
- ³³Andrade, 367.
- ³⁴Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 44.
- ³⁵Ibid., 51.
- ³⁶Ibid., 59-61.
- ³⁷Ibid., 64, 65.
- ³⁸Ibid., 66.
- ³⁹Andrade, 386.
- ⁴⁰Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 72.
- ⁴¹Ibid., 77-81.
- ⁴²Ibid., 91.

⁴³Ibid., 96.

⁴⁴Ibid., 108, 109.

⁴⁵Ibid., 99-102.

⁴⁶Ibid., 120, 121.

⁴⁷Ibid., 143.

CHAPTER 4

AIRPOWER'S CONTRIBUTION

I think probably the most significant change in airpower over the last 25 years . . . is this complete flexibility and our capacity to respond at a moment's notice. If anybody had told me 25 years ago that you could take a fighter wing out of Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico and have it overseas in less than a week and have it flying combat, I'd have said, "You're nuts!"¹

General Lucius Clay Jr.

The successful defense of South Vietnam during the Easter Offensive is the result of many factors, not the least of which was the strong diplomatic, economic, and military support from the US. Politically, President Richard Nixon's decision to defend South Vietnam at virtually all costs short of the reintroduction of US ground forces was the framework from which airpower became the military instrument of choice to halt the invasion. Was US airpower truly decisive? Was it the one dominant military factor that stopped and drove back the advancing NVA?

It is difficult to break down this complex campaign into single, separate factors and then analyze each factor independently as to its relative value to the whole. All of these variables or factors are to some degree intermingled with each other, dependent on certain key pieces and parts from the other factors. Despite this difficulty, the contribution of airpower will be analyzed to determine the primary question of this thesis: Was US airpower the most decisive military element in the 1972 defense of South Vietnam?

Prior to exploring the primary areas detailing the effectiveness of US airpower, this paper will examine the TACS used in South Vietnam in order to provide basic

background information as a necessary lead-in to the rest of the air analysis. After reviewing the TACS, the analysis of airpower's contribution will be broken into three main parts: (1) the strategic deployment of US airpower, (2) the strategic bombing and operational interdiction campaign, and (3) new airpower tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that were effectively employed to help stop the offensive.

The strategic deployment of US airpower into Southeast Asia in response to the Communist offensive was unprecedented and provided the massive air armada necessary to effectively operationally and tactically employ US airpower to its best advantage. The strategic bombing and operational interdiction campaign launched throughout North Vietnam had a strong operational impact on the battlefields across South Vietnam. The new airpower TTP that were effectively employed included the near perfection of the FAC-A role supporting US advisors, the tactical use of B-52s and fixed-wing gunships, and as well as other technical innovations improving bombing accuracy.

Many of the details covering the strategic and operational employment of airpower during this campaign were covered in chapter 2 as a part of the strategic and operational overview. As a result, this chapter will summarize areas all ready covered in chapter 2 and focus on airpower's unique strategic and operational accomplishments during the Easter Offensive. Similarly, the tactical employment of CAS contributed greatly to the defeat of the Communists, and many of these individual tactical successes were chronicled earlier in chapter 3 as a part of the tactical analysis in the three contested MRs. Thus, the tactical employment of CAS and attack aviation previously chronicled will be summarized and folded into the discussion of the TACS and the other three areas as appropriate.

The Theater Air Control System

The TACS in South Vietnam contained three primary sub-systems: the TACC, the DASCs, and Tactical Air Control Parties (TACPs). The TACC, located at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in MR III, provided centralized control of tactical airpower in South Vietnam.

Its specific functions included:

1. Planning, coordinating, and directing in-country tactical air operations
2. Publishing fragmentary orders
3. Directing, monitoring, and diverting offensive and defensive aircraft as necessary
4. Establishing policies and procedures governing the operations of the TACS²

The TACC was jointly manned by both USAF and VNAF personnel in what could loosely be described as a parallel command structure, where each nation managed its own air assets.

In addition to the TACC, each of the four MRs had a DASC to manage the employment of airpower allocated to its region. Much like today's operational environment, where air operations centers send aircraft forward to air support operations centers to employ in a counterland mode across the battlefield, the TACC in Vietnam would send the CAS sorties to the four DASCs who were responsible for managing the sorties in each of their respective MRs.

The next subordinate component of the TACS below the DASC level was the TACP. TACPs normally consisted of ALOs, FACs, and radio operators and equipment.³ To employ CAS, a DASC could send an aircraft to a division or brigade ALO or FAC to provide terminal air control on to a target. By 1972, there were very few US ALOs still in

theater, and most of the terminal air control was provided by airborne FACs, or FAC-As. The FAC-As were specially trained pilots whose primary role was spotting or marking targets for other strike aircraft to attack. During the Easter Offensive, the preponderance of FAC-A work was done from the slow, small propeller-driven O-2 and OV-10 USAF aircraft, although there were some USAF fast FACs flying jets in theater as well as FAC-As from the Navy and Marine Corps. USAF fixed-wing gunship pilots, whose move into the CAS arena will be chronicled later, also became valuable nighttime FAC-A assets with their low-light, long-loiter capabilities.

Along with other forces in South Vietnam, Vietnamization pushed the USAF to begin a relatively rapid shift of the TACS to VNAF control. In June 1971, the TACC at Tan Son Nhut transferred completely to VNAF control with a separate TACC at 7AF to control US air assets. The VNAF TACC had no USAF operational advisors, although the Air Force Advisory Group did set up an initial qualification training program to help educate VNAF officers for duty in the TACC. The VNAF assumed control of the DASCs in all four regions by August 1971, with a USAF detachment in each VNAF DASC providing command and control of US tactical aircraft supporting the ARVN.⁴

The weakest link in the Vietnamization of the TACS was the effort to build effective VNAF TACPs. For a variety of reasons, both the VNAF ALOs and FACs were far behind their US counterparts when the Easter Offensive began. First, it was difficult to get officers to be assigned to this unpopular duty because of its perceived lack of glamour and because the VNAF needed virtually all of its experienced pilots to take leadership positions in its rapidly expanding air force. Additionally, VNAF FACs flew older variants of the O-1, which had outdated radio suites insufficient for effective FAC

duty. Because of these problems and others, VNAF FACs and ALOs often lacked the rank and experience to effectively perform their duties. Additionally, the VNAF tended not to keep their FAC-A pilots in an area long enough to become familiar enough with the local terrain to effectively spot enemy forces and direct attacks against them.

As 1971 closed and with the Easter Offensive approaching, USAF reports on the combat effectiveness of the VNAF TACS were mixed. While the VNAF was making slow, steady strides at improvements at all three levels of the TACS, they were not close to being ready for tackling the looming NVA threat without the USAF TACS assuming the bulk of the combat command and control work. The VNAF TACPs, that is its ALOs and FACs, were the weakest link of its TACS.⁵

When the Easter Offensive began, the Americans had withdrawn virtually all TACPs from MR I. One of the few exceptions was 3rd ARVN Division advisor Major David Brookbank, whose ALO duties suddenly expanded exponentially. After the VNAF TACP in the region quickly collapsed, Brookbank was forced to assume ALO duties for virtually the entire area.⁶ Due to the magnitude of the offensive in MR I, and because of the reintroduction of large-scale American tactical airpower to the region, it became necessary for the USAF to assume control of the TACS.

The TACS in MR II was in better shape than MR I when the NVA attack began. Prior to the offensive, there were plenty of USAF TACPs remaining in the region, although their role was primarily advisory. This enabled the USAF and VNAF to closely coordinate command and control of their respective air forces once the enemy offensive began. The increase of USAF TACP advisors led to better trained VNAF FAC-As who provided excellent terminal control for VNAF strike aircraft. The VNAF were so

effective in this region that they were eventually granted the job of providing CAS to Kontum City itself, allowing US airpower to focus on other vital areas around the besieged province. As stated earlier, but worth repeating, MR II's senior US advisor, John Paul Vann, called the performance of the VNAF "magnificent, absolutely magnificent."⁷

In MR III, the performance of the VNAF TACS was difficult to assess. There were problems coordinating aircraft in and around the very congested airspace over An Loc. The introduction of both fixed-wing gunships and B-52s into the fight, along with the heavy AAA threat to the low and slow FAC-As only made the command and control issues worse. Ultimately, USAF FACs, along with the rest of the American piece of the TACS, were assessed as very effective in MR III. In this region, the VNAF TACS, despite individual examples of heroism and competence, left much room for improvement.

The Strategic Deployment of United States Airpower

When the Easter Offensive began, the US still had 800 aircraft of all varieties in Vietnam and Thailand, 363 were strike variants, including 211 F-4s and 52 B-52s. Additionally, two US Navy carrier air wings were also in theater. The VNAF also had nearly 1,300 aircraft, a significant force numerically but one that was, in several respects, unprepared to respond to the huge offensive launched by the Communist north.⁸

Once the magnitude of the Communist offensive was realized in both Saigon and Washington, the massive deployment of aircraft from around the globe began almost immediately. The first air unit to deploy was a squadron of F-4s alerted on 1 April and sent from Kunsan, Korea, to the DaNang AB after an overnight stop at Clark Air Base in

the Philippines. After two days of indoctrination training, the crews were flying combat missions on 5 April. Two Marine F-4 squadrons deployed from Japan starting on 6 April and were flying combat in Vietnam by 11 April. The Marines also sent two squadrons of A-4s in mid-May from Japan to Bien Hoa Air Base.⁹

The US Navy doubled its carrier presence off of Vietnam with *Kitty Hawk* and *Constellation* joining *Hancock* and *Coral Sea* by 8 April. The *Midway* joined the group arriving from the Eastern Pacific on 30 April, followed by the sixth and final carrier, *Saratoga*, which arrived shortly thereafter. Each of the carriers had an air wing with approximately 90 aircraft, totaling 540 aircraft to cycle into the air war which was a significant contribution. Once all six carriers had arrived, at least four carriers remained in position for air operations, with each providing 70 percent of its assigned aircraft available for operations each day. This sent an impressive 252 available sorties on average to each day's air fight.¹⁰

On 5 April 1972, General Abrams requested additional Air Force deployments. The Joint Chiefs of Staff approved this request and USAF Tactical Air Command started a series of deployments known as Constant Guard I, II, III, and IV. Strategic Air Command issued similar deployment orders for its B-52s and other assets. The Constant Guard I deployment included one squadron of F-105s from McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas, and two squadrons of F-4s from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina.

The Seymour Johnson F-4 deployment is a great example of how years of USAF efforts to streamline its global deployment capability really paid off by the spring of 1972. In the middle of an arduous operational readiness inspection, the air wing at

Seymour Johnson was alerted late on 5 April, the same day the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved Abrams' request. Over the next three days, 38 C-141s arrived to take over 854 of the wing's support personnel along with 400 tons of supplies into theater. Additionally, the first squadron of eighteen aircraft departed on 8 April, with the second a day behind. These crewmembers flew eleven hours non-stop to Hickam Air Base, Hawaii, with several air refuelings along the way. They flew to Guam the next day, and finally to Ubon, Thailand the third day, arriving on 11 April losing a calendar day crossing the international date line. After recovering from their deployment half way around the world and completing theater indoctrination and familiarization training, some of these same F-4 crews were flying combat missions on 14 April, barely more than a week after Abrams requested additional assistance from the Air Force.¹¹

By 11 April, Nixon deployed an additional 92 Air Force fighters into the Vietnam area of operations, including the F-4s and F-105s already mentioned, and 91 B-52s from bases in the US. By 23 May, 108 more fighters had arrived, along with 70 more B-52s.¹²

This massive influx of aircraft easily doubled, if not tripled, daily US air strength in theater, particularly considering the additional four carrier wings, along with the added 161 B-52s, each with its tremendous payload capacity of eighty-four 500 pound bombs. It was largely thanks to this huge strategic deployment that MACV was able to mass US airpower across all three hotly contested MRs, tipping the scales in favor of the embattled defenders repeatedly during the campaign.

The Strategic Bombing and Operational Interdiction Campaign

When President Nixon removed many of the targeting restrictions in North Vietnam as a result of the spring invasion, he was looking for broad strategic outcomes that could best be accomplished primarily through US airpower. Saigon's military did not have the capacity to effectively attack targets north of the border, and other components of US military power, land and sea, were primarily enablers for aircraft to reach these deep target sets within North Vietnam. For purposes of this section, strategic bombing refers to the attacking of targets that have strategic-level effects. Additionally, operational interdiction is defined in this thesis as the interdiction of men, supplies, and equipment far enough away from the main battle areas such that the effects are not immediately felt on the battlefield. While assigning no hard and fast timelines, operational interdiction generally affects next week's fighting, while battlefield air interdiction, striking troops massing for attack just beyond the forward line of troops for example, effects today and tomorrow's fight.

While the primary objective of Operation Linebacker was certainly to severely restrict men, supplies, and equipment from reaching the heavy conventional fighting in South Vietnam, Nixon was also undoubtedly sending an important strategic message to Hanoi's leadership. The message was that even though America was withdrawing its ground forces, its leadership was willing to do everything else possible to defend South Vietnam against Communist aggression. By risking his newly forged relationships with the Soviet and Chinese governments, as well as his own political standing back in America, Nixon communicated through his actions to Hanoi that this offensive, and any others occurring during his presidency, would be very painful to the people of North

Vietnam and their economy. While this coercive bombing campaign initially did not slow Communist forces in the south, over time it became an increasingly successful tool against the Communists in the effort to convince Hanoi's leaders to stop the invasion and sign a peace agreement.

As an operational interdiction campaign, Operation Linebacker was vastly more effective than Commando Hunt or Rolling Thunder, not just because of the improved target sets in North Vietnam, but also because the NVA were now attempting to support heavy, sustained ground combat of large mechanized forces, requiring a much greater logistical effort than smaller scale attacks and guerilla warfare. It had a major impact on the ability of NVA forces in the south to continue the offensive, particularly in MR III. USAF leaders, who had long been asking for the ability to aggressively strike targets in North Vietnam, were ecstatic at Linebacker's results, with one stating, "Linebacker was not Rolling Thunder, it was war."¹³

Because the NVA had stockpiled so many supplies in forward staging areas in Laos, Cambodia and in remote areas adjacent to the battlefields from within South Vietnam, the operational interdiction attacks in the north did not immediately affect the fighting in the south. However, as the conflict stretched into May, and then June, Operation Linebacker's effects were much more evident. The destruction of key road and railroad bridges, with the attacks against the fuel storage facilities at Haiphong, and the mining of North Vietnam's harbors severely restricted the Hanoi's ability to support the heavy ground combat over the long term, contributing to changing the tide of battle in all three MRs in South Vietnam's favor.

Operation Linebacker was successful as both a strategic bombing campaign and an operational interdiction campaign. Operation Linebacker was only possible due to the large US air armada in theater. Linebacker's strategic and operational successes against North Vietnam enabled long-term tactical success on the ground in South Vietnam. The global movement of US air assets into theater allowed US military leaders to simultaneously prosecute Operation Linebacker against the north while still providing the strike aircraft required to repeatedly attack NVA ground units in the south.

New Innovative Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

Going into the Vietnam War, the USAF was primarily geared for a large conventional or even nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union. The mindset of USAF leaders and the arsenal of USAF aircraft were not designed for a limited counterinsurgency conflict that they initially found themselves fighting in the jungles of Southeast Asia. As a result, up until 1968, USAF leadership was forced to adapt to this new type of air warfare. By 1972, however, the conflict had turned into a primarily conventional fight, and USAF leaders shifted battlefield tactics accordingly.

As the Easter Offensive loomed in 1972, the USAF had already adapted in several areas, coming up with a variety of TTP better designed to fight the North Vietnamese. First, USAF FAC-As had all but perfected the art of airborne terminal air control when the Easter Offensive was launched, providing a key link between the US advisors supporting their ARVN counterparts and the supporting strike aircraft.

During the Easter Offensive, the FACs perfected techniques of managing complex, congested airspace in several instances, most notably over Kontum and An Loc. They put high FACs up to manage strike aircraft flowing into and out of various airspace

sectors, “handing off” the attack aircraft to the low FACs in each sector for terminal air control guidance. These FACs also dealt with difficult issue of coordinating and deconflicting B-52 Arc Light and fixed-wing gunship missions from the other tactical aircraft operating in the same target area. The flexibility and innovation displayed by the FAC-As during the Easter Offensive was critical to the successful defense of many besieged areas in South Vietnam.

Fixed-wing gunships were developed in an attempt to improve US interdiction of NVA supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and also provide better long-loiter CAS capability in a low air threat environment. Beginning with AC-47s, followed shortly by AC-119s and AC-130s, these highly effective platforms were developed in spite of much resistance from some USAF leaders whose bias toward high-tech, high-end jet aircraft left them dubious of these new slow-speed, low-end, propeller-driven platforms. Prior to the Easter Offensive, these gunships had already proved themselves very effective, both at interdicting supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and as an emergency CAS platform for any unit finding itself in dire consequences, particularly at night, and in need of a long-loiter, anti-personnel platform to prevent being overrun.

During the Easter Offensive, the dire conditions at An Loc, Kontum, and Quang Tri forced the gunships to completely shift focus, from that of a deep interdictor, to a conventional CAS provider. Although there were growing pains in trying to work the gunships into the fight due to the fact that most FACs and many US Army advisors were initially unfamiliar with their capabilities, soon they were providing critical, unit-saving, fire support all across South Vietnam. Many of these examples were already provided in chapter 3, including the fact that at An Loc “at least one gunship remained over the city at

all times during the siege.”¹⁴ Part of the benefit of the gunships during the offensive was its ability to loiter over a battlefield, particularly at night using its low-light sensor capability, and provide critical battlefield reconnaissance and situational awareness to the defenders below. Along with the new FAC TTP, the new tactical use of the gunship was absolutely necessary to the successful defense of South Vietnam during the Easter Offensive.

Additionally, B-52s were designed as high-altitude, strategic bombers which could carry nuclear weapons into the Soviet Union. However, these bomber crews found themselves heavily involved in Vietnam, developing new conventional tactics along the way. One of these new tactics was the use of Combat Skyspot, which was a ground-based radar system that used its radar fix on the B-52s, along with ballistic data considerations and other information for accurate ordinance delivery. This system was tested and proven reliable and was particularly useful when poor visibility prevented strike aircraft from striking a target. Additionally, the USAF developed three-ship, V-formation Arc Light bombing formations, which allowed the three bombers to each drop up to eighty-four 500 pound bombs simultaneously on to an area target below. This payload could be increased to 108 five-hundred pound bombs with the “Big Belly” modification. Prior to the Easter Offensive, Arc Light formations were used effectively against NVA formations, but not nearly on the scale seen during the spring of 1972.

With the massive influx of B-52s into theater, Abrams was able to provide each of the three ARVN corps commanders of MRs I, II, and III, with plentiful B-52 Arc Light missions. With this new resource available, the senior US advisors quickly adapted, developing strike boxes around their main battle areas for use as area targets for massing

NVA just beyond friendly lines, as was discussed in chapter 3. Additionally, the use of Combat Skyspot allowed accurate bombing into these strike boxes even during periods of poor visibility. As General Abrams put it, “There is no question that the B-52s have been a major factor, and on occasion the deciding factor, in preventing the enemy’s accomplishment of most of his major goals.”¹⁵

Another development that occurred during the Vietnam War was the laser-guided munition. LGBs use a laser designator to illuminate a target. The reflected laser light from the target is then detected by the seeker head of the weapon, which sends signals to the weapon’s control surfaces to guide it toward the designated point. LGBs were first used in Vietnam in 1968, finally enabling precision attack on difficult targets such as bridges, allowing far fewer sorties to ensure success.

Using the fast moving F-4s as a CAS platform often produced disappointing results during the Easter Offensive. Because of their speed, F-4s had a more difficult time performing low-altitude precision CAS, which was often required when troops were in contact with the enemy and during marginal weather. However, with the advent of the LGB, F-4s could now be used as individual tank killers. The practice, later dubbed “tank plinking” when used during the first Gulf War by F-111 aircraft, allowed the F-4s to put the laser spot on the tank and then let the bomb “ride” in on target. With specially modified OV-10 FAC-A aircraft carrying new “Pave Spot” equipment that included laser designators, the technique even became more effective. The slower and lower OV-10 FACs, dubbed Pave Nail, could illuminate the tank or other target for the F-4s, who would then launch the LGBs on the FAC’s “spot.” This was just another example of

USAF TTP innovations that developed just prior to 1972 but were exploited to full advantage during the Easter Offensive.

In this thesis, airpower's unique contribution to the 1972 Easter Offensive was highlighted. Airpower was pervasive across all three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. Through the unprecedented strategic deployment, the massive strategic and operational bombing campaigns, the highly effective CAS employment, and the emergence of new TTP, airpower's contribution to the 1972 Easter Offensive victory was mighty. Was airpower "the" decisive factor in this victory?

¹Pacific Air Force Commander General Lucius Clay Jr on the rapid US deployment of airpower following the start of the Easter Offensive. Doglione et al., 124.

²Joseph G. Meeko, *Vietnamization of the Tactical Air Control System* (Honolulu, HI: Project CHECO, 7th AF, CHECO/CORONA Harvest Division Operations Analysis Office, HQ PACAF, 1974), 1.

³*Ibid.*, 8.

⁴*Ibid.*, 14-16.

⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

⁶David K. Mann, *The 1972 Invasion of Military Region I: Fall of Quang Tri and Defense of Hue* (Honolulu, HI: Project CHECO, 7th AF, CHECO/CORONA Harvest Division Operations Analysis Office, HQ PACAF, 1973), 19.

⁷Sorley, 338.

⁸Doglione et al., 112.

⁹*Ibid.*, 113-115.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 115.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 117-121.

¹² *Ibid.*, 124-125.

¹³Sorley, 327.

¹⁴Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, 81.

¹⁵Liebchen, 73.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RELEVANCE TODAY

The tremendous firepower unleashed by the USAF, especially B-52 strikes, effectively blunted all enemy efforts on three fronts, disrupted enemy supply lines, and helped the RVNAF conserve their ground forces. It also gave the RVNAF much-needed respite to recover from the initial enemy shock, consolidate their lines of defense, and regroup for the counterattack.¹

ARVN General Cao Van Vien

When the North Vietnamese launched the Easter Offensive on 30 March 1972, it marked the beginning of the last major battle US forces would fight in the Vietnam War. Unlike the Tet Offensive, fought four years earlier, the US no longer had any major ground combat units engaged in this epic struggle. Instead, President Nixon chose instead to employ US airpower on a massive scale against the Communist invaders, leveraging its ability to conduct parallel warfare on all three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. Was this application of US airpower the decisive component that led to the defeat of Hanoi's southward plunge? Yes. Although this thesis has shown that this very complex fight had multiple dimensions, several fronts, and many decisive points, in the end, one and only one ingredient was absolutely vital and irreplaceable to the defenders' defeat of the NVA invaders: US airpower.

Airpower's Contribution

This thesis has clearly shown that US airpower was decisive in the defeat of the 1972 Easter Offensive. With the political constraints narrowing his options, President Nixon boldly chose to inject massive amounts of airpower into Vietnam and remove many of the political restrictions guarding its use against targets in North Vietnam. This

thesis broke down the primary factors that led to the conclusion that US airpower can be extracted as the primary component in preventing Communist victory during the spring offensive. Detailed in chapter 4, these factors were:

1. The rapid massive global deployment of airpower into the area of operations in response to the offensive.

2. The strategic bombing and operational interdiction campaign against North Vietnam.

3. US innovations in airpower tactics, techniques, and procedures

Based on these factors, this conclusion will show how US airpower gave the South Vietnamese forces an asymmetrical advantage at all three levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical.

First, the analysis of airpower's contribution detailed the tremendous display of rapid global mobility, which was the key enabler for all of the other dominant areas of US airpower. This deployment of aircraft gave the US air arsenal enough combat power to effectively perform parallel operations at all levels of the conflict. It was with this huge air armada that the US delivered the knock-out blow to the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive. As massive amounts of bombers arrived in theater, the strategic bombing and operational interdiction campaigns sent a strategic coercive message to North Vietnam. These attacks let North Vietnam know that Nixon was willing to risk his newly forged relationships with the Soviet and Chinese governments by doing everything short of reintroducing American ground forces to save South Vietnam.

Additionally, Linebacker's interdiction campaign was much more effective than Commando Hunt or Rolling Thunder had previously been. Linebacker not only struck

improved target sets in North Vietnam, but also benefited from the fact that the NVA were now attempting to support heavy, sustained ground combat of large mechanized forces, requiring a much greater logistical effort than smaller scale attacks and guerilla warfare.

Finally, chapter 4 detailed how the use of innovative TTPs directly led to improved combat effects on the battlefield. The changing role of fixed-winged gunships from deep interdicator to devastating CAS platform and the employment of B-52s in and around besieged defenders were two such TTPs that led to devastating attacks against enemy forces in close proximity to ARVN defenders. Additionally, the emergence of the FAC-A, working directly in support of US Army advisors, was another key TTP that led to the overwhelming tactical success of US airpower.

All of the airpower contributions were advantages that North Vietnam just could not match. It was, in effect, an asymmetrical advantage. Combat power that one side had, and effectively employed, and the other did not.

The Asymmetrical Advantage of United States Airpower

The Vietnam War was a complex mixture of all of the elements of national power of both North and South Vietnam, as well as the US. Although the diplomatic, economic, and informational elements of national power and their relevance and influence on the conflict are beyond the scope of this paper, North Vietnam skillfully used the Cold War environment to match the US in these areas. They brilliantly used information operations, particularly the media, to their great advantage in the battle for US public opinion to gradually erode support for US involvement in the war. They also leveraged the other major Communist nations of China and the Soviet Union to garner critical economic

support toward their effort to unify Vietnam. However, when it came to the military element of power, despite the large quantities of Soviet and Chinese equipment and supplies, Hanoi's forces were no match for their US opponents. With the US ground force pullout virtually complete, though, the Communist forces had more than enough military power to compete with and defeat RVNAF forces to the south. The one advantage across all three levels of war--strategic, operational, and tactical--that the southern defenders had was US airpower.

With the VC no longer a significant threat, the North Vietnamese no longer had a legitimate military means at striking at the strategic targets in South Vietnam, specifically Saigon. To reach Saigon, the NVA would have to tactically slug its way south through ARVN defenses. On the other hand, this thesis has already shown that US airpower, through Operation Linebacker, was able to directly strike strategic targets all across North Vietnam every day. North Vietnamese air defenses were able to shoot down some US aircraft, but not enough to significantly prevent US attacks on strategic targets in the north during the Easter Offensive.

Additionally, the global reach displayed by the deployment of US airpower from around the world into the theater once the offensive had begun shifted the combat ratio advantage from north to south. The North Vietnamese could not match this sudden influx of new military power into the theater. Combined with Operation Linebacker, this global reach was evidence of the strategic asymmetrical advantage for the US airpower had over its Communist adversaries.

Operationally, US airpower was the one consistent military component from either side that could truly maneuver across the entire battlefield, quickly massing at

specific, decisive points, tipping the scales in favor of besieged defenders in many locations during the Easter Offensive. General Abrams decision to mass all of his B-52 Arc Light strikes consecutively in each of the three contested MRs on 11, 12, and 13 May was an excellent example of huge operational advantage that airpower provided. It was a scale of operational attrition that the NVA could not match, even with its massive tactical artillery arsenal. US airpower gave the Easter Offensive defenders a clear operational asymmetrical advantage.

Tactically, during the Easter Offensive, US airpower was presented with its nearest “peer” competitor: NVA artillery. The Communists artillery was their most valuable battlefield operating system during their attacks. The quantity, quality, and effectiveness of the NVA artillery was head-and-shoulders above their ARVN fire support counterparts. If US airpower had not been assisting the ARVN, there can be little doubt that the Communists’ surface-to-surface firepower would have given the NVA an overwhelming asymmetric advantage at the tactical level of war nearly allowed them to attain their invasion goals. With US airpower in the mix, the edge swung back in favor of South Vietnam, but in some cases, just barely.

In areas such as An Loc, Kontum, and Quang Tri, NVA artillery battered ARVN defenders, and airpower equally punished the attackers. In this bitter war of attrition, Quang Tri fell but Kontum and An Loc held. Why? Some of the reasons for this were the combination of the shock of the NVA assault, poor ARVN leadership, and inexperienced troops of the 3rd ARVN Division. Other likely contributors were poor weather that inhibited US air operations, along with numerous lesser factors, such as the no fly

restrictions resulting from the EB-66 shoot down and MR I's TACS problems mentioned earlier in this paper.

What saved An Loc and Kontum during these bitter battles of attrition between NVA artillery and USAF airpower? The longer the Easter Offensive lasted, the momentum of the fight in each of the three regions slowly shifted to the defenders. Throughout April, the USAF was sending massive amounts of US airpower from the states. In May, seventy-one more B-52s arrived. The more time that passed, the more that Operation Linebacker interdiction success affected the battlefields in the south. Plus, with each passing week, more and more US aircraft were available for tasking across the tactical battlefields. Additionally, attackers are at a disadvantage when trying to assault and capture cities or towns in situations where both sides have large amounts of effective fire support. They have to leave cover, mass in some sort of formation and then attack, likely crossing open terrain. Defenders for the most part can remain deep within their bunkers and are less vulnerable to enemy firepower. Likely a combination of all of these factors led to a key decisive point in time, different in each area, where the firepower advantage shifted permanently in favor of the defenders. Quang Tri fell on 30 April before this decisive shift had occurred in that province. Kontum and An Loc, thanks to its courageous ground defenders, a lot of daring airlifters and CAS providers, managed to remain in the hands of the defenders long enough to see this balance shift in their favor and eventually attrite the attacking enemy into submission.

Did the US have a tactical asymmetrical advantage over the NVA during the Easter Offensive? Based on the preceding analysis, the answer is yes and no. Early on in all three battle areas, massive NVA artillery barrages easily matched USAF and VNAF

CAS responses. So early on, neither side had a clear-cut tactical firepower advantage. Eventually, however, the tactical firepower advantage shifted enough that by the end of the Easter Offensive, the firepower advantage was large enough to be considered asymmetrical in favor of US airpower.

The asymmetrical advantage that US airpower held across all three levels of war was the key and “decisive” element to the successful defense of South Vietnam during the 1972 Easter Offensive. After examining the facts, there is no question that without US airpower, the forces of the Republic of Vietnam would not have held off the Communist invaders from the north.

Relevance Today

Much has changed in the US and its military in the thirty-plus years since the end of the Vietnam War. The global struggle against Communist influence and expansion has been replaced with the equally dangerous global struggle against radical Islam in the War on Terror. The large conventional battlefields of the 1972 Easter Offensive in Vietnam have been replaced by the conventional and unconventional battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. What lessons from the epic struggle to defend South Vietnam from the massive NVA onslaught in 1972 can be useful to today’s military leaders? Political pundits often ask whether or not the situation in Iraq in 2006 is analogous to the US situation in latter stages of Vietnam. Is it? While there are drastic differences in the US position in Iraq, there are some similarities. This section will examine those similarities and suggest how 1972 Vietnam lessons can be applied today in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, as the US military transforms into a leaner, lighter, and more flexible force,

this paper will examine what important lessons from the Easter Offensive should not be overlooked.

First, there are definitely similarities in the strategic environments between Vietnam and Iraq. During the latter stages of Vietnam, President Nixon was forced to make tough choices on how to pull out US ground forces without collapsing the fragile government of South Vietnam. President Bush today faces a similar choice in Iraq due to eroding public support for keeping US ground forces in the country. As pointed out in this thesis, Nixon effectively used the strategic deployment and operational and tactical employment of US Airpower, without redeploying any conventional ground units, to earn victory in 1972, and in fact, it was only after all US military support, including airpower, was pulled from Vietnam did the North ultimately launch a successful conventional attack into South Vietnam, leading to Vietnam unification under Communist rule.

Unfortunately in Iraq, the enemy is not a large conventional force, but a complex insurgency, with competing groups attempting to force US withdrawal and thwart the democratic government in Iraq. Thus the “cookie-cutter” approach of using the Easter Offensive model that Nixon used would not apply. Large ground forces or “boots on the ground” supported by airpower, are needed to successfully fight a counterinsurgency along with the coordinated use of the other nonmilitary elements of national power. However, important ground forces are in the counterinsurgency fight, supporting airpower can be vital to locating, capturing, or killing insurgents. Right now, Iraq has no combat air force, and no effective helicopter assault force. Thus, as the US eventually withdraws its ground forces, it must either train up an Iraq Air Force, leave US air forces in the region supporting Iraqi ground units (the 1972 Vietnam model), or accept risk by

letting the Iraqi ground forces accept the mission without supporting airpower. The lesson from the Easter Offensive and eventual fall of South Vietnam three years later would suggest that complete and relatively rapid withdrawal of both ground and air forces by the US from Iraq could have disastrous consequences.

As the US military transforms in a fiscally constrained environment, hard choices and trade-offs must be made with respect to force and unit size and disposition; weapon system modernization and procurement; and doctrine and tactics. The USAF continues its strategy of replacing reliable but aging fighters with new, technologically advanced aircraft. These new F-22s and F-35s will eventually replace much larger numbers of F-15, F-16 and A-10 aircraft. The US Army is in the process of transforming into a lighter, leaner force that is more deployable and flexible. There are debates about how to balance the force posture between fighting today's counterinsurgency fights in Afghanistan and Iraq against preparing for a potential high intensity conflict in the future with a near-peer competitor.

In this current environment, what lessons from the 1972 Easter Offensive have value? First, in its pursuit of staying ahead of the rest of the world technologically, the USAF cannot lose sight of the value of low-tech, high payoff platforms supporting ground forces with CAS. The OV-10 FACs and A-1 fighters were applied with devastating effect in Vietnam, as were the relatively simple and inexpensive A-10 in Iraq and Afghanistan. Upgrades and service-life extension programs for these low-tech platforms are often scrapped in favor of purchasing a few more of the new, high tech systems such as the F-22. On the other hand, proponents of the A-10 and opponents of the F-22 must be reminded that without air superiority, successful CAS, such as that

displayed during the Easter Offensive and during Operation Iraqi Freedom, would be impossible. The US must maintain its edge over its competitors in the counter-air arena, and weapon systems like the F-22 and F-35 will continue that tradition.

The US must continue to modernize and procure its tanker and airlift fleet if it wants to continue to have the capacity to mount the extremely high level of strategic air deployment that was first accomplished during the initial phases of the Easter Offensive and then repeated immediately following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. If you cannot get the massive amounts of firepower there, and get it there quickly, then you cannot use it. This was a huge lesson from the Easter Offensive.

Finally, USAF airpower advocates are quick to point out how once the "gloves came off" and most of the restrictions on North Vietnamese targets were lifted during the Easter Offensive and subsequent Linebacker II operation, Communist forces could no longer be re-supplied and Communist leaders were ultimately forced back to the negotiating table. While this line of thinking is certainly an over-simplification, unrestricted targeting of North Vietnam was certainly a factor in the defeat of NVA forces in South Vietnam and in coercing Hanoi's leaders into signing a peace agreement. Unfortunately, by focusing on this one aspect of US airpower involvement in Vietnam in 1972, many airpower advocates miss the other equally important--arguably more important--lesson from the conflict: the importance of CAS. CAS has long been neglected by USAF leaders in favor of mission sets with seemingly higher payoff operational and strategic target sets. Bombing bridges in and around Hanoi and Haiphong may have affected the next day's war, or the next week or next month's battles, but it did little to prevent the many cases where US and ARVN defenders were nearly overrun,

only to be saved by timely and devastating CAS. As USAF strategic planners prepare for tomorrow's wars with recommendations on how to best organize, train and equip America's air force for these conflicts, they cannot overlook the requirement to retain the capability to effectively deliver airpower's effects in support of and in close proximity to America's ground forces.

The defense of South Vietnam against North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive was an epic struggle across three major battle areas. Many factors across all elements of national power led to the ultimate success of the US and South Vietnam in blunting this offensive. However, as this paper has shown, it was ultimately the massive strategic, operational, and tactical employment of US airpower that was the decisive element that led to North Vietnam's defeat. Arguably, airpower as a whole has never had finer performance.

¹ARVN General Cao Van Vien describing the effectiveness of US airpower during the Easter Offensive. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 158.

GLOSSARY

Air Liaison Officer. The senior tactical air control party member attached to a ground unit who functions as the primary advisor to the ground commander on air power.

Arc Light Bombing Formation. A bombing tactic used by B-52s, flying in three-ship, V-formations whereby their payloads can be concentrated into a small target area.

Asymmetry. A lack or absence of symmetry. A lack of proportion between two sides in a military conflict where one side has something that the other does not.

Close Air Support. An action by fixed-and rotary-wing aircraft against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and that require detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces.

Corps Tactical Zone. An area in South Vietnam defended by a South Vietnamese Army corps. South Vietnam was divided into four corps tactical zones that were later renamed military regions just prior to the Easter Offensive.

Direct Air Support Center. This organization managed the tactical employment of air power within its South Vietnam military region.

Division Advisory Team. Led by a United States colonel, this unit advised its associated South Vietnamese division on the military employment of its organic and supporting forces.

Firebase. Outposts designed to deliver or assist in delivering friendly fires upon the enemy.

Forward Air Controller. An officer (aviator/pilot) member of the tactical air control party who, from a forward ground or airborne position, controls aircraft in close air support of ground troops. Also called FAC.

Forward Air Controller (airborne). A specifically trained and qualified aviation officer who exercises control from the air of aircraft engaged in close air support of ground troops. The forward air controller (airborne) is normally an airborne extension of the tactical air control party.

Ho Chi Minh Trail. A network of jungle paths winding from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam, used as a military route by North Vietnam to supply the its forces in South Vietnam.

Interdiction. An action to divert, disrupt, delay, or destroy the enemy's military potential before it can be used effectively against friendly forces, or to otherwise achieve objectives.

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. This was the United States unified command structure for all its military forces in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Military Region. A region in South Vietnam defended by a South Vietnamese Army corps. South Vietnam was broken into four military regions during the Easter Offensive.

Nguyen Hue Campaign. The North Vietnamese name for the 1972 Easter Offensive.

Operation Commando Hunt. A covert United States air offensive against personnel and supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam from 15 November 1968 until 29 March 1972.

Operation Lam Son 719. A limited-objective offensive campaign conducted in southeastern Laos by South Vietnam between 8 February and 25 March 1971.

Operation Linebacker. This was a United States aerial interdiction campaign conducted against North Vietnam from 9 May to 23 October 1972. Its purpose was to halt or slow the transportation of supplies and material for the Easter Offensive. Linebacker was the first continuous bombing effort conducted against North Vietnam since the bombing halt instituted by President Lyndon B. Johnson in November 1968.

Operation Linebacker II. This was a United States aerial bombardment campaign against North Vietnam during the final period of the American commitment to the Vietnam War. The operation was conducted from 18 – 29 December 1972 and saw the largest heavy bomber strikes launched by the U.S. Air Force since the end of the Second World War.

Operation Rolling Thunder. A gradual and sustained aerial bombardment and interdiction campaign conducted against North Vietnam from 2 March 1965 to 1 November 1968.

Operational level of war. The level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to achieve strategic objectives within theaters or other operational areas.

Pacification. A United States program designed to assist the South Vietnamese government earn legitimacy in the eyes of its populace, particularly in the countryside.

Province Advisory Team. This United States unit was responsible for advising a South Vietnamese provincial chief on matters of pacification and maintenance of regional and popular forces.

Strategic Bombing. Air combat and supporting operations designed to effect, through the systematic application of force to a selected series of vital targets, the progressive

destruction and disintegration of the enemy's war-making capacity to a point where the enemy no longer retains the ability or the will to wage war.

Strategic level of war. The level of war at which a nation, often as a member of a group of nations, determines national or multinational (alliance or coalition) strategic security objectives and guidance, and develops and uses national resources to achieve these objectives.

Tactical Air Control Center. This organization provided centralized control of tactical air power in South Vietnam. Similar in function to today's Air Operations Center.

Tactical Air Control Party. A subordinate operational component of a tactical air control system designed to provide air liaison to land forces and for the control of aircraft.

Theater Air Control System. The system containing all the sub-systems required to employ air power in a given theater of operations. In Vietnam, South Vietnam's theater air control system included the Tactical Air Control Center, the Direct Air Support Centers, and the Tactical Air Control Parties.

Tactical Level of War. The level of war at which battles and engagements are planned and executed to achieve military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces.

Viet Cong. A North Vietnam supported Communist-led army and guerrilla force in South Vietnam that fought its government.

Vietnamization. The effort to train, organize and equip South Vietnam forces to take over their nation's defense during the Vietnam War.

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USACGSC
1 Reynolds Ave.
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